ScoTpress



WITH A HOOP OF STEEL

a STAR TREK
fanzine

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WITH HOOPS OF STEEL

by

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Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to your soul with hoops of steel.

Hamlet, Act 1 scene 111

Shakespeare

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton.

Sand-gritted hands shadow my eyes,
Lids narrowed gainst the fierce sun's wrath,
My vision blurred, I strain to see what lies
Beyond the rocks that quiver on the path.

Heat burns my shoulders through clinging shirt,
Sweat puddles on my back in vain to cool.
My feet, twin swollen agonies, encrusted with the dirt
Of Vulcan's blood-red soil, and I the fool

Who seeks you hopelessly: and yet
I'll search the desert lands for one who knows
His own world as I never can, teeth set
Against the torturing heat that hotter grows.

Lose you I cannot; for if you are dead
I'll seek beyond the grave to find my friend.
The bond that binds us, love that stays unsaid,
Is stronger than my life, will never end.

They tell me, and with logic are the reasons given,
You cannot still be living, but I still pursue
The path I now am on, although my heart is riven
With fear and dread and anger. Now a flash of blue

Catches my eye, and fierce hope flares,
But mind in doubting agony I run,
O'er burning rock, through brilliant light which glares
To add to tears I shed unforced by sun.

Beside your body now I kneel and place
My trembling hands upon your still, unmoving breast,
Dropping my head to look upon that face
More dear than kin. Fulfilled my quest.

I stay beside you as the cooling day
Turns into night around us, and the sky
Which we have roamed together helps me pray
That we may not be parted, and I, too, may die!

WITH HOOPS OF STEEL

McCoy glared furiously across Kirk's desk.

"Of all the idiotic, ridiculous things I ever heard of, Captain," he snarled, "this is the damnedest! A decision you will spend the rest of your life regretting. Luckily for you, I shan't be around to tell you I told you so - I'm getting out too. Since Spock left, you've been impossible to live with!"

The angry doctor added despair to his mixed catalogue of emotions as he watched steel shutters draw down over Kirk's face. He'd hoped the reference to Spock, gone so quickly, so inexorably with the rest of the crew only a week before, would have broken Kirk at last and made him talk out his loss.

"Spock felt his usefulness in space was over and that his life needed a new heading," Kirk said coldly. "I respected his decision, Doctor, as you should mine. There is nothing more to be said."

McCoy's shoulders slumped. Three weeks of argument, all the way to the Admiral's office, had taken their toll. He was aware of the manipulation that had shaped Kirk's decision, aware of the blank Spock's swift departure had left in both their lives, and sensed that Kirk had still not accepted or understood that loss as he should. To make him see it now might be unnecessarily cruel, might even push Kirk, still physically and emotionally drained with the abrupt relaxation that had come with the ending of the Enterprise's five-year mission, over the edge he seemed to walk so carelessly. Maybe the two of them would come to their senses in time, though he feared not. He sank down into the nearest chair.

"I'm sorry, Jim. Sorry it all had to end like this - after five glorious years it should have ended with a burst of rockets, but there's only the silly thump of a burned-out stick dropping in the back yard. One day we'll all know what we've lost... I only hope it won't be too late for us."

Kirk, too, relaxed, leaning back in his chair. "Bones, you're a sentamentalist," he said accusingly.

"Maybe I am," McCoy conceded. "I don't happen to see anything wrong in a little old-fashioned sentiment."

"You can't go backwards," Kirk said gently. "We haven't come to the end of our useful lives by a long way, merely to one part of them. It's happened to us before, that we've turned our backs on a dead past." McCoy winced at old memories; Kirk rose to place a gentle hand on his shoulder. "We both have good things to go on to, Bones. We'll keep in touch."

McCoy nodded. He felt old, tired and drained. "A couple of months away will do us both good," he agreed. "Have you made your plans, Jim?"

Kirk grinned at him. "Bones, you know as well as I do how much I've been seeing of Lori Ciani - you can add two and two with the best of 'em!"

Then McCoy knew he was defeated. Nogura he might have fought, but with Lori Ciani ranged alongside, apparently prepared to play the whore for Starfleet, it was time for a simple country doctor to duck out.

"One day, Jim," he said numbly, "one day you'll understand what you've lost, and then..... God help you!"

Kirk sat down again and watched his cabin door slide to, carefully unclenching his fists. He spent too much damn time consciously relaxing these days. Well, in three hours he'd be off on that extended leave with Lori. He felt his tired body tingle with anticipation. Companionship was what he needed, the lazy acceptance of undemanding friendship, the meeting of compatible minds... His thoughts shied nervously. To hell with minds. He'd thought he had the greatest friendship a man had ever been offered, now it was gone, wrenched from him before he'd had time to think or argue. Spock had completed his debriefing, handed his resignation over and left within the day, leaving Kirk still enmeshed in his own long and arduous conferences at the completion of their mission. A more Vulcan Spock than he had

seen since their early days together, his eyes remote and cold, refusing to see the pleading in his friend's face. Kirk's expression hardened at the memory. Well, he was damned if he would follow him. After five years of relationships, Edith, Miramanee, and the many, many others, less deep but still meaningful, made only to be broken, he was more than ready for a steady, one-year contract and a little stability around him. He asked nothing more than a simple life with no calls to duty, no life and death decisions, no balancing of one evil against another, and above all, no more agonising over the possible death of that one being...

Idly, he wondered just how many times in the last five years he had thought he had lost Spock for ever. How worry had threatened to tear him apart until desperation had found a way yet again. Small wonder Spock had made the final break and gone back to Vulcan, probably to lose his Human half for ever. Well, he wished him luck - the future was ahead, and for the first time in five years, he could predict most of what that future would bring. A simple life, peaceful and direct; first a long, long leave with Lori so he could relax, soak up sunshine and fresh air, revel in the sensuous pleasures of idleness and female company, and then, refreshed and eager once more, his new job at Starfleet, the chance of bridging the widening gap in understanding between the earth-bound members of his breed and those who ranged the universe. A valuable, rewarding task. While othr others tore themselves apart out there, he would be healing his own wounds, becoming whole once again.

He stood up. Still plenty to do before he finally relinquished command of his ever-demanding mistress and took himself to a gentler, easier partnership. Now for the final tour of inspection, the final leavetaking, and then it would be over - behind him - gone.

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Lori woke in the moonlit room and watched the pacing figure. She sighed inwardly. The news could hardly have come at a worse time, and she silently cursed the visitor who had interrupted their idyll. They were nearing the end of their year's contract now, and Kirk had settled comfortably into the daily routine at Starfleet Command. His days were solidly filled with work of obvious necessity, and would be for many months to come. She shrugged away the thought of the time that would inevitably come when that work-load would leasen. That worry could be dealt with then. This present concern had been beyond her control. Neither she nor Nogura had allowed for the sudden eruption of McCoy upon their carefully directed scene. The Doctor had arrived unannounced, doubtless knowing they would have managed to prevent his seeing Kirk had he sent any warning of his arrival. The news he brought had been known to them at Starfleet, and they had deliberately kept it from Kirk, guessing it would unsettle him once more. McCoy had thrown her one sardonic glance and turned to Kirk.

"Jim, Spock has been in an accident on Vulcan, and they are not sure he will live."

He threw it, that cruelly, at the unsuspecting Kirk, and for one horrifying moment she saw total disorientation on his face.

McCoy gripped his arms fiercely. "Hang on, Jim, you've been here before, remember?"

Kirk shook his head, lips white. "No, Bones. Then, remedy was in my hands. Now..." He broke off. "Can I get to Vulcan in time?"

"Jim, no!" She slipped between them. "Jim, you can't leave here now. The Andorian conference is in three days and you have to be there. There's no-one else that can deal with it."

"Nonsense," McCoy growled. She rounded on him fiercely.

"Doctor, you have been in Starfleet, though you've since opted out. You know that duty must come first, there are no excuses. If Jim could do anything

useful on Vulcan it might be different, but he's an Admiral, not a Doctor. They cannot let him go. If you wish to go, doubtless you can be spared more easily."

McCoy shook his head, his eyes steadily on Kirk. "I'd be no good," he said softly. "Spock wouldn't welcome me."

"Spock went to get away from Humans," Lori said contemptuously. "He wouldn't welcome Jim, either."

Naked hurt showed on Kirk's face. It was true; Spock had said it himself, in that one brief interview he had permitted before he left, shutting Kirk out of his life, no longer wanted.

"She's right, Bones," he said dully. "Spock doesn't want us now, either of us. I can do no good rushing off half-cocked across the Galaxy. I'm needed here."

"Needed," McCoy snorted. "Yes - for a job that could be done by half the man you used to be, Admiral."

He turned away. Kirk grabbed his shoulder.

"Bones! Don't make it harder."

McCoy swung back, the fire gone from his blue eyes. "I'll stay, Jim," he promised, "until we know one way or the other."

And he had stayed.

Lori moved restlessly on the bed; Kirk paused in his pacing and came to her side. "I'm sorry. I woke you."

"Yes. It doesn't matter, Jim." She sat up, pulling him down beside her. "Jim, you'll wear yourself out, and you have five tough days ahead of you. You can't let Starfleet down!"

"I won't let them down," he said harshly. "I've worked through times like this before, Lori. It's just that I can't do anything positive. It's waiting helplessly that hurts."

She put her arms round him tenderly. "Vulcan healers are among the best in the Federation, Jim," she said gently. "They'll pull him through if they can."

He shuddered and clung to her, a child seeking comfort. She looked down at his bent head in surprise. "Does he mean that much, Jim?"

He nodded slowly. "Like a brother, Lori, more than a brother. He's saved my life a thousand times, and my sanity as well. If he dies, part of me will die too."

Anger flared in her. She would not lose out this easily; they had so nearly moulded Kirk into the man Starfleet wanted, and she was not about to fail now. She caressed him gently, almost absently, pondering her next move.

"Tell me about him, Jim."

Slowly, painfully, he began to talk, remembering the friendship he had had to dig so deep to find, but that had been so worth the searching, such a sense of completeness.

"He's not an easy man to get to know, Lori. Because he's half Human he over-compensates, becomes more Vulcan than even the most traditionally-minded Vulcans. And he was so lonely, never at home. I thought he had found peace in our friendship, but...he hadn't. He needed to go back."

"The Vulcan way is hard," she said quietly. "I wonder if he can make it."

"He'll make it," Kirk said bitterly. "I've never known him fail in something he undertook. If you needled him right."

- Forgive me, Mr. Spock, I do sometimes expect too much of you. -

- The trouble with immortality is that it's boring. Adjusting the translator will give you something to do! -

- You belong in a circus, Spock, not a Starship. Right next to the dog-faced boy! -

- Mind your own business, Mr. Spock. I'm sick of your half-breed interference! -

Remembering closeness he had lost swept loneliness over him like a swelling sea. He clung to Lori, slow, burning tears gathering. "He was the best, Lori; the best friend, the best First Officer a man could have wished for. I'll never replace him."

"You don't need to replace him, Jim. You have your life. But don't worry, I'm sure he'll pull through safely."

"Even if he does," Kirk said raggedly, "I've lost him. Lost everything." He let the tears fall, unashamed.

She changed her touch from motherly to something more subtly rousing. "You still have me, Jim."

She kissed the salt tears from his eyes, wondering as she did so at the depth of his feeling for his lost friend. "I need you too, Jim." She slid her arms over him gently, changing from subtlty to open demand. Kirk was surprised to find himself resist her touch at first, but at last resistance melted under her expert hands. He moved his own, blotting out misery in present ecstasy.

His waking headache did not surprise him, but the dull ache of misery in his gut was not lessened. However, he went from task to task throughout the day, proud of his control and meeting McCoy's sharp eye with steady assurance when they met again at the evening meal.

"Any news?" There! He'd managed to ask it calmly.

McCoy shook his head. "Don't you think I'll let you know just as soon as there is, Jim?"

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Kirk shuffled his papers together and let out a long breath. It had been a tough day, but he'd achieved what Starfleet had asked of him, finding a rapport with the Andorian, Procash, that had stood him in good stead. Now his duty lay behind him and he could once more open his mind to the sense of desolation that lurked unceasingly at the back of his thoughts. After a fortnight there was still no news from Vulcan, and McCoy's face had become steadily older as the blank days had passed.

"No news is good news." He muttered the futile proverb aloud, squared his shoulders and made his way out through the chattering throng of delegates, acknowledging greetings with the easy friendliness that nowadays seemed to mean so very little.

As he entered their flat, he could hear Lori's and McCoy's voices raised in the living quarters.

"It is not necessary to tell him, Doctor."

Kirk paused, attention caught.

"Vice-admiral," McCoy's tone was coldly formal. "Spock has also written to Jim; I cannot undertake to promise that he will not inform him personally."

Joy flooded Kirk, then pain. Was the letter from the living, or a final farewell from the newly dead? He clenched his fists, carefully loosened them

again, and stepped into the room.

"A letter?"

McCoy's face had shed ten years. "He's fully recovered, Jim. There are letters for both of us. I've brought yours over from the Vulcan Embassy. Diplomatic bag!"

Kirk took it slowly, eyeing the two faces before him. "What is it not necessary to tell me, Lori?"

She grinned at him. "Listeners never hear any good of themselves, James Kirk! Read your letter. The news is good."

He opened it. Typically, it began abruptly.

"I am fully recovered now, and there is no need for any further enquiry about me. I shall return to Gol soon, and continue the disciplines I have begun to achieve Kolinahr. I shall not leave Vulcan again, now that the Masters have accepted me as an acolyte. Live long and prosper, Admiral Kirk."

The neat signature, so long familiar, gave nothing away. It was as simple as the letter and as heart-wrenching. Kolinahr, the ultimate Vulcan discipline, the total negation of emotion, a state achieved by very, very few, even among the dedicatedly logical Vulcans. Coldness gripped his heart. This news was - not as bad as death, but nearly so. He realised now, as it died within him, that he had still had hope, hope that Spock would return and the old bond would still hold. Silently, he wished Spock peace, and, resigned, instigated the process of acceptance within himself. He turned to Lori.

"You're right, Lori. The news is good." He managed a smile.

Unconvinced by it, McCoy scowled at him. "Good news? I've heard better. This Kolinahr..."

"Will bring him peace, Bones." The smile was better this time, bitter-sweet. "He never was at peace, you know, always his two halves at war with themselves. Wish him luck, as I do."

McCoy blinked hard. "Once before I didn't wish him luck," he said, "and I regretted it. But he had it just the same." He turned to Lori and caught a gleam of triumph as it faded into softness. "Well done, Vice-admiral," he told her evenly, "you've just done what you set out to do. I'll go now - I've work to be getting on with, too."

Lori melted into Kirk's arms as the door closed.

"What did he mean?" Kirk asked, puzzled.

"That you have achieved peace at last, Jim," she told him lovingly. "Like your friend, you have found where you belong."

Her mouth stilled his further questioning.

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Two years later, his chance had come and he had grasped it eagerly. And with his return to the Enterprise had come a return of purpose. He was alive again.

And then there was Spock, come at his urgent need. No time for questions, no time to worry about that cold, harsh face and voice that told him nothing, only time to deal with the pressing, demanding problems of each immediate moment. No time even to feel more than the initial shock of pleasure when Spock had come round from that near-disastrous mind-meld - and laughed, and taken his hand so tightly. No time to think of anything at all until Scott's offer:

"We can have you back on Vulcan in four days," and then his own realisation of joy at Spock's reply, "Unnecessary, Mr. Scott. My task on Vulcan is completed."

So, the problem of V'ger solved, the Enterprise tested to his satisfaction, Kirk settled once more into the routine that had been, was, so satisfying. Spock, the Enterprise, familiar, friendly faces around him; the sensations were almost tangible, and the shadowy Kirk who had existed through the last three years was gone. He was himself again, out once more where he belonged, where he intended to stay, now that he knew himself. Confidence flooded him, ebbed as he remembered Spock's coldness when he had first returned, then flooded again as he recalled the tight grip of the Vulcan's hand on his in Sickbay. There had been naked emotion on that stone face, unashamed not only before Kirk, but before McCoy and Chapel. There had not been time then to probe more deeply, but now, now that they were back into routine, there would be time to talk, and boy! was he going to talk, and that stubborn, pig-headed Vulcan was going to listen!

The stubborn, pig-headed Vulcan in question was biding his time, waiting to see what Kirk's next move would be. The shattering experience Spock had undergone since returning to the Enterprise might have broken another, but the mastery over the deeper levels of his mind he had achieved with the Masters of Gol had strengthened him and he had withstood. Now he awaited events with a calmness that surprised even his Vulcan half. He had fought so hard, achieved so much, and yet...and yet...when he had returned to the Enterprise it had been a homecoming. He could acknowledge it now. A meeting of old and valued friends. They had not let his coldness matter, accepted him and been glad, but he had seen their hurt. He let this new tranquillity flood him. He was closer now to the serenity that had eluded him previously, and it had come through the relaxation of barriers he had hoped to build too high for breaching, the Kolinah . Indeed, his answer had lain elsewhere. Kirk would seek him out when the time was right; he could trust that all-too-perceptive Human for that.

The Human had his doubts, however, and bided his time. The friendly chess games were renewed and, finally, Kirk brought his courage to the sticking-point and bore the Vulcan off to his quarters.

"Sit down, Spock."

The Vulcan sat obediently, leaned back in the chair, one eyebrow slightly lifted, and watched Kirk, fussing a little, pouring drinks. Kirk turned and caught his eye; his face broke into a slow, warm smile.

"It's good to have you back, Spock. Welcome aboard!"

The eyebrow flared. "You said that before, Captain."

"Yes, and you ignored it!"

Spock nodded. "I still have a lot to learn, Jim."

"From us?" Kirk could not keep the eagerness from his voice.

"From all of you," Spock agreed, "but most of all from you. I was wrong to have gone, I know it now, but if I had not undergone the discipline of Kolinahr, I could not have survived my link with V'ger, so I cann.t regret the past. To have understood so much of what I need and then to have lost it would have been hard."

"What is it you need?" Kirk asked it softly, head half turned away.

"You, Jim Kirk!" The voice was soft, but emphatic.

"God!" Kirk's shoulders slackened. "How I needed to hear you say that, Spock. I...lost direction after you left."

"I know." He took the proffered drink and eyes it soberly. "Our good friend McCoy took care I knew it."

"McCoy? What... How?"

"When I was injured - Amanda came to see me. McCoy had written to both of us."

"He dared to interfere?"

Spock gave a half smile. "He dares a lot when your welfare is concerned. Then, I could not turn from the path I had chosen. I had found a kind of peace, and thought it was the right one." He paused, pondering the best way to say what must be said.

"He didn't hurt you?" Kirk asked gently.

"I was past pain then. As I said, I had found a kind of peace. My mother felt it was not for me, but she did not press me. She knew that, if I achieved Kolinahr, I would be at peace, and though it was not what she wanted for me, she knows enough of Vulcan to know it would be a satisfying life."

"Total emptiness?" Kirk wondered, shaking his head.

"Total acceptance," Spock corrected him. "Once gained, there is nothing that can break it, nothing that can turn your mind back. You have only to see those who have it to see that it is right for them."

"Do you still want it?" Kirk held his breath.

Spock shook his head. "I failed, Jim. My answer lies elsewhere."

"You...failed?" Kirk could not help the disbelief in his voice, and was surprised to see his friend shudder.

"I almost succeeded. On the last day, I felt V'ger's thoughts touch mine, and then yours, my t'hy'la."

"Mine?" Kirk still could not really believe that.

Spock nodded. "You wanted me beside you, so I came."

The simple words almost brought tears to Kirk's eyes. He swallowed the lump in his throat and achieved a Vulcan calmness before replying, "I needed you, Spock, as never before. I'm glad you came."

"I'm glad I failed. One day later and V'ger would have been too late to affect me. I would have been beyond your calling."

"Spock, you're a touch telepath, how could you hear my thoughts?"

Spock met his eye. "There is a bond between us two."

"You've felt it too?" Eagerly.

"Felt it, and denied it. I no longer deny it."

Kirk gave a deep sigh and a rueful smile. "I wish I could have felt your thoughts when you were injured. I went through hell those few days."

"I understand." Spock met his eyes steadily. "There will be other times too, now. The dangers are ahead of us again, not behind us."

"It will be worth it." Kirk said it firmly enough, but there was an inner shrinking at the prospect of the hours of worry that would inevitably come. He studied his friend's face hungrily. The past years had left their physical mark on Spock, bringing a new leanness to a frame already over-thin. The prominent cheekbones threw long shadows down the gaunt cheeks, but the dark eyes under the flaring brows held a warmth that had looked out at him only in unguarded moments in the past. It seemed the need to hide was in the past also. He smiled again, a long, slow smile of sheer content.

Spock accepted the look without turning aside - now he must learn to interpret correctly the swift changes of expression that portrayed his friend's volatile nature.

"That smile," he said slowly. "Contentment?"

Kirk looked startled. "Yes, I 'geuss it was."

"And now I have surprised you?" Kirk smiled again. "And that is sheer amusement," Spock said with some satisfaction.

This time Kirk laughed aloud. "Is this some new kind of game, Spock?"

"You might call it that, but it does have a serious purpose."

A teasing look in reply. "Oh, I never doubted that, Spock. May I be privileged to know what the purpose is?"

"Indeed. I wish to read your face as amother Human would. Even if many of the emotions you experience are alien to me, there is no reason why I should not understand them intellectually. So, while I learn, I will ask when I am unsure. Do you mind?"

"Life under a microscope?" Kirk said, deadpan. "Does the culture on the slide object?"

Spock felt a brief surge of uncertainty; it subsided quickly. The studied solemnity was there, but the tensed muscle at the corner of the mouth betrayed control.

"I believe I shall do very well," he said, pleased. "I had not previously realised how valuable it might be to study the Human countenance so closely."

"Better not try it on with everybody." The muscle quivered slightly. "Not everyone will appreciate the purity of your motive."

"There is no need for me to read others as I wish to read you," Spock said severely. "You need not fear that I will embarrass people needlessly."

"But you don't mind embarrassing me?"

"You do not embarrass easily," Spock told him calmly.

"How could I be embarrassed by you? How many times have I revealed myself to you in the mind-meld? I've lost count. But ever since that first contact on Thul, I have known that you could take what you found and accept it. + A Human mind is pretty chaotic, I guess, and there must be elements you find distasteful, memories I couldn't control." He paused. "Sex, for instance." "I tried to suppress the memories, but I knew they were there, and you never seemed to mind."

Spock's eyes never left his face. "You have a strong will, Jim, you suppress things more easily than you think, but yes, I have touched such memories - lightly. Why should you think I should mind? Such aspects of our lives are as matural as eating and breathing."

"But not to a Vulcan."

The eyebrows rose. "Our species also reproduces bisexually."

"Yes, but..." Kirk's eyes dropped, then lifted again. "Your experiences are different from ours."

"Different, yes." Spock spoke with some difficulty. He broke off and seemed to search within his mind for a moment. "Not entirely different, although there are some essential..." He paused again, then gave the tiniest of shrugs. "The right words will not come. I'm sorry."

Kirkwas momentarily concerned to see Spock apparently struggling for words, as he had at the onset of pon farr. Clearly this was not an easy subject for Vulcans to discuss, still, it seemed he'd got into his stride again.

"Not entirely different. You, of all people, should know that we are always capable of sexual activity, although we can block the sensations at will, except under pon farr." He noted the surprise on Kirk's face. "Had you not realised this?"

"Yes...and no. I thought it was your Human half that gave you problems."

"Not in that way." Spock's eyes held a reflective look. "When I found I was not going to avoid pon farr, I regretted, for the first time in my life, that my Human half was not stronger. Our needs may not overtake us as frequently

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as they do Humans, but when they do, they are totally outside our control, as in an insanely perverted Human. Have you not touched my memories of that time?" Kirk nodded. "They did not repulse you?"

"Why should they? They are a part of you."

"Precisely my point, Jim."

A companionable silence prevailed for a while. Kirk stretched like a cat. "You don't know how good this feels, Spock."

"But I do know. I, too, am experiencing a sense of homecoming. It is most pleasant."

Kirk grimaced. "Until the next time you put yourself in danger, or we are out of touch and I can't reach you."

"Jim...it might be possible for us to achieve a mind link that will enable us to link our thoughts at will, possibly even over great distances."

Kirk straightened abruptly. "I'm not a telepath, Spock."

"No, but your thoughts touched mine on Vulcan, when you needed me. We may be able, so to speak, to tune our minds so that you can reach me at will, and hear my thoughts in reply. Since you are not a telepath, you will not be able to touch anyone else's thoughts but mine, but I believe it could be gained between us two, if you wished it."

"Wish it!" Kirk said explosively. "How can we do it?"

"By a complete fusion, a total submersion in each other's thoughts."

"But isn't that incredibly dangerous? I thought that there is a possibility that you might not be able to withdraw from such a link."

"There is that possibility, but I have had experience of this with Kollos. It would be best to make the attempt under supervision, however. On Vulcan, such bonding is not unknown between those who are close. Would you be willing to let them help us?"

"Willing!" I'd welcome the whole thing gladly," Kirk said roughly.

"I, too," Spock told him softly. "Fear of the unknown is a very powerful thing, Jim; I fear not knowing what is happening to my impulsive, reckless friend."

"Fear is an emotion," Kirk said, watching him.

"And one that is not alien to me," Spock agreed.

Kirk laughed suddenly, gladly. "Spock, Spock, my Vulcan friend. I'd thought these last three years were wasted ones, but they have taught us so much about ourselves I can be sorry now, either. Do you know, I've been dreading talking to you? I wanted to say so much, but was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"That you wouldn't understand, that you hadn't felt the bond as I had, but you gripped my hand so tightly, Spock, after your link with V'ger..."

"I needed reassurance, and you gave it me, and quite suddenly I found I could accept it, and not turn away. Since then, I have been waiting for you to find the right moment to talk to me. I was doubtful of my own judgement in the matter, or I would have come to you. I still have a lot to learn from you."

"It'll be a pleasure, both teaching and learning in my turn," Kirk said gladly. "Another drink?"

Spock looked at his glass. "I have not finished this. I have few social manners, I'm afraid."

"Spock, there's no need for you to abandon all your Vulcan ways while you are learning."

"I do not think I could," Spock said seriously, "but I no longer have to try to demonstrate Vulcan mores single-handed."

The teasing look grew in Kirk's eyes. "You know, I had a feeling that's what you were doing. Your father smiles much more than you do."

Spock looked startled. "Does he?"

"Indeed he does. Of course, he, too, has been contaminated by close association with a Human!"

"During my final preparation for Kolinahr, I realised it was my boyhood on Vulcan that had driven me into Starfleet. I came to prove to myself that no Human could make me less Vulcan."

Kirk leaned forward and touched his hand sympathetically. "Children can be unthinkingly cruel; doubtless Vulcan children are no different." He got to his feet. "As soon as I can get us to Vulcan, I will do so."

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They did not have long to wait, for only six weeks later they received orders to proceed to Vulcan. Kirk studied them in surprise.

"A request for you and me and Dr. McCoy to attend a meeting of the Vulcan Council, Spock. And idea what for?"

"None, Captain. Doubtless we shall be informed of what they want on our arrival."

"Oh, doubtless." He grinned at his friend. "No curiosity?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I see no logic in speculating, Captain."

"The Enterprise is to do some survey work in the area while we're gone." He made a slight grimace.

"She will be quite safe, Captain," Spock said blandly. "Lt-Commander Sulu is a fully competent officer."

Kirk ignored him loftily, but had to admit inwardly that he felt some reluctance at leaving his ship so soon after regaining her, but he could hardly expect to leave her in parking orbit for a week and more. She had a straightforward enough survey to make, and should anything go wrong, anything at all, he had Uhura's solemn promise that he would be contacted immediately.

"You're laughing at me, Lieutenant," he told her severely.

Her mouth quivered. "We'll look after her for you, sir."

"I know you will," he said in his command voice.

She laughed. "That's why, sir. Enjoy yourself."

He grinned. "We're going to Vulcan, Uhura. It's not a holiday."

They beamed down to the Vulcan city of ShiKahr, Spock's home and the seat of Vulcan government. They were greeted formally and shown to spacious, air-conditioned apartments. They had barely settled in when visitors were announced.

"Ambassador Sarek, Lady Amanda." Kirk rose to his feet, giving the formal Vulcan salute, noting with pleasure that Spock was clearly on the best of terms with his family once more.

When the formalities were over, Sarek came straight to the point. "The Vulcan Council has some dissenting voices on the subject of Starfleet, Captain Kirk. As you know, there has not always been complete agreement here as to the desirability of what is, in effect, a fighting force, although your missions are predominately non-aggressive. Since the loss of the Intrepid, there has been a strong body of opinion which holds that Vulcans take less part in Starfleet,

and reserve our activities strictly to the political and scientific areas of Federation affairs."

"That would be a great loss to the Federation," Kirk said sincerely. "Vulcan Science Officers in particular are valued, and much sought after by any Captain who has ever been fortunate enough to have one under his command."

Sarek nodded gravely. "It would be possible, would it not, for Science Officers to serve as non-military personnel?"

"Possible, but unwise."

"Unwise? Specify."

"Spock will forgive me for saying this, I know, but it has happened in the past, that I have had to give him orders that had to take precedence over his purely scientific duties. While you will appreciate that there are very few, even among your people, that could combine the positions of First Officer and Science Officer as Spock does, it is nevertheless desirable that regulations should apply to all Science Officers, however junior their rank. The safety of a great many people may depend on one man's reaction to discipline. I would be reluctant to accept a Science Officer who was not also a fully trained member of the service."

"That is interesting," Sarek commented. "I will inform the Council of your views on this matter, Captain Kirk, and tomorrow afternoon, others will wish to ask questions also."

"May I ask what your own views are on this?"

"My views are not in consideration, Captain. The Council knows where I stand, and have asked to see you on my recommendation."

Kirk knew when it was best to remain silent.

The arrival on Vulcan of two such well-known people as the Captain and First Officer of the Enterprise could hardly go unnoticed even by such a phlegmatic race, and the reception organised for them that evening was remarkable for the numbers of Vulcans who wished to meet them. On any other planet such a reception might well have degenerated into an undignified crush, but this remained a sober, well-organised affair from beginning to end.

It was just as well, McCoy thought, that a cheerful smile would have been as out of place as at a funeral. The highly intellectual conversation that was the Vulcan version of idle chatter was somewhat wearing after a time. He was not sorry when Spock, possibly taking pity on him, introduced him to a devastatingly attractive Vulcan girl.

"T'Yana, may I introduce the Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise?"

The girl raised her hand in the Vulcan greeting. "I am pleased to meet Dr. McCoy. I would be interested to discuss the technique of..." McCoy groaned audibly. "You are unwell?"

He opened his eyes appealingly. "On Earth, this would be a party, T'Yana, and one doesn't discuss one's work at a party."

"I have violated some Earth custom?"

"No, no. Just that I'll have to be concentrating hard tomorrow, tonight I need to relax."

"I understand. You do not use the technique of meditation?"

"No." He smiled wryly. "We have other, less logical, ways of loosening up. Talking to a pretty woman is one of them," he added hopefully.

She smiled. "Then we will talk. What shall we speak of, if not of matters of mutual interest?"

"You're in medicine?"

"You said we should not speak of it."

"Well, I do see rather a lot of nurses," he agreed. "If this was Earth, I'd suggest we go out and look at the moon, but even if Vulcan had a moon, it wouldn't really be of any use."

"Of what use is Earth's moon? Is it mined?"

McCoy grinned, "Well, yes, it used to be. It's pretty well worked out now, though. But it's also useful for providing a dim, romantic light for courting couples!"

She gave a disdainful glance. "Ah, yes. You Humans have the most haphazard methods of selecting your mates."

"But pleasant," McCoy reflected. "May I get you another drink, T'Yana?"

"Thank you, no. I am sufficiently refreshed. I must leave now. I shall look forward to another meeting when you are less tired."

McCoy bowed formally, then leaned forward confionntially. "You're the prettiest thing I've seen in a long time. I shall look forward to seeing you again."

The guests were leaving now, in ones and twos, coming to take their formal leave. As the last of them left, McCoy lifted his glass.

"Your planet has something to recommend it, Spock; after all, it is possible to appreciate the beauty of green grass, even if it does have large KEEP OFF notices."

Kirk grinned at him. "The women getting to you, are they, Bones?"

The Doctor sighed and took a long, satisfying drink. "What is more, in this heat I can even understand why you keep off the alcohol."

"Hilva does have a mild alcoholic content, Doctor," Spock reminded him.

"Yeah?" McCoy eyed the cloudy purple liquid closely. "I'm glad you reminded me. I'll enjoy it all the more." He drank it down and held out his glass for a refill. "So, tomorrow we're off to the Council. Pity. I wouldn't have minded getting to know T'Yana better."

"Doubtless she will be there, Doctor, she is a member of the Council."

McCoy's eyes lit up. "Good, I'd like to see that little bundle of delight again."

Spock's eyebrows crawled into his hairline. "Bundle of delight, Doctor?"

McCoy winked at him. "She's the prettiest nurse I've seen this side of the Enterprise, Doctor."

"Doctor." There was exaggerated patience in the voice. "T'Yana is not a nurse. She is the Head of the Mental Healing Academy here in ShiKahr."

McCoy's jow dropped. "That little chit head of... She hasn't had time to be head of school yet, Spock. She can't be a day over..."

"Fifty four Earth years," Spock said coolly.

"Fifty..." McCoy's voice failed. "Hell, and I was kidding her..."

"I heard you, Doctor." Spock's voice was as bland as milk jelly. "I'm sure she found you a most interesting specimen of homo sapiens. She has made a special study of Humans."

"You!" McCoy's finger shot out accusingly. "You set me up."

Kirk began to laugh, and McCoy turned on him. "Were you in this as well, Captain?"

"No, no," Kirk protested. "I thought she was only a girl, too, Bones. But

you've got to admit that Spock has come out best this time."

McCoy glared at the offending Vulcan. "Just you wait, you point-eared hellbaby!"

The next morning Spock excused himself from accompanying his companions on their guided tour of ShiKahr, and went to the Mental Healing Academy as he had arranged privately with T'Yana the night before.

"You wished to consult me, Spock?"

"I believe it may be possible to attain a bonding between Captain Kirk and myself. I have come to ask you to assist us."

"A bonding with a Human, Spock?"

His face did not change. "I would remind you, T'Yana, that I am half Human myself."

"All Vulcan knows that of you, but you have proved yourself pure Vulcan over the last three years. You met every test of Kolinahr."

"Except the final one." He did not seek to hide the fact. "My answer lay elsewhere, and I believe this bonding to be a part of that answer."

"I will consider it today, when I see the Captain at the Council, but I must warn you, I am dubious of the possibility. It has never been achieved between a Vulcan and an alien."

"I remind you again, I am part alien. Also, Captain Kirk's will is very strong; I have occasionally found it difficult to release a meld with him."

"You have used the meld?" She could not quite cover the note of disapproval.

"It has sometimes been necessary."

"You will forgive me, but I must ask the question. It has not been... distasteful?"

"Illogical, T'Yana. Were it so, the possibility of bonding would not exist."

"Logical. I will observe the Captain and give you my answer later, but I fear it will be a negative one."

The Vulcan Council might have been intimidating to someone less accustomed to dealing with aliens, Kirk told himself firmly. But inwardly, he admitted to considerable nervousness. The Vulcan people had come to mean a great deal to him, and he would be sorry to see any lessening in the understanding between their two peoples. He took his seat in the vaulted room between Spock and McCoy with outward calmness. He recognised only four faces; Sarek, T'Yana, an elderly man he had met the previous night - and T'Pau. They were facing a wide, stone chair set at the focal point of the oval room, on which T'Pau sat with the rest of the Council on each side of her. She gave no sign that she remembered their previous encounter. If it came to that, he'd have been surprised, and not a little embarrassed, if she had.

"Captain Kirk, are thee willing to answer our questions?"

"I shall be pleased to do so."

"And Dr. McCoy, are thee also willing?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Then we will begin. Skall, thee has a question."

One of the oldest Vulcans present spoke. "Captain Kirk, Starfleet is a military organisation, is it not?"

"Yes, of necessity, with the situation as it is at present with the Romulans

and the Klingons. In the future...we all hope for a permanent peace throughout the Galaxy."

"The Vulcan people are dedicated to peace, Captain Kirk."

"I am well aware of that, and for that reason would regret the loss of your presence in Starfleet. We all, Humans as well as other races, need and welcome your influence."

"If your ships were not so heavily armed, Captain, we might see more evidence of your true desire for peace."

"With respect, sir, the fire-power of a ship such as the Enterprise is not used solely in offence. Without the full power of the phaser banks and photon torpedoes as well, several completely peaceful missions would have ended in disaster."

T'Pau motioned to another man who was waiting to speak. "What is your general order No. 1, Captain?"

Kirk quoted it in full, his heart sinking, knowing he could be heavily challenged over some actions he, and others in his position, had taken.

"And have you always complied with it?"

"To the best of my ability. Life is never black and white, I often have to select the lesser of two evils. I do not, and nor can any other being, claim infallibility. I may well have chosen wrongly at times. The advice of Vulcans in this area is invaluable."

Spock rose to his feet. "May I speak, T'Pau?" She signalled him to continue. "The wording of the Prime Directive is, of necessity, vague. Specifics cannot be laid down unless the full facts are available. I have never known any Captain to break the directive deliberately."

"And have you always agreed with Captain Kirk's actions?"

"No."

McCoy directed an angry look at him, disguising it quickly.

"What action have you taken when you were not in full agreement with him?"

"I have made my point of view known to him."

"And then?"

"Sometimes he has modified his decisions accordingly, at others he carried out his original intentions."

"And you did not object further?"

"With respect, I would remind the Council that he is the Captain of the Enterprise; the responsibilities are his, not mine."

"Yet, as a Vulcan, you objected?"

"As a Vulcan, I give my loyalty to my commanding officer."

McCoy smothered a grin at the massive snub, remembering the long arguments that had occurred on occasions.

The questioning continued with yet another speaker. "Is it not sometimes the case, Captain, that Humans have been unwilling to work with Vulcans?"

"When they do not know, then yes. For a fuller answer to your question, you should consult any member of my crew who has served with Commander Spock."

"Commander Spock is half Human."

"No-one who is unaware of that fact would ever suspect it," Kirk said smoothly, "but those who learn it only learn to respect him more."

"I do not see the logic in your statement, Captain."

"Being Human, we see the Vulcan way as...not easy."

"And are there no conflicts?"

"Naturally there are conflicts, but since our aim is to learn to live in harmony, how can we achieve it if we do not have representatives of as many races as possible in Starfleet?"

"At one time, Commander Spock was the only non-Human on your ship, Captain."

"Not any longer. I am pleased to say that the Enterprise now has many other races on board."

"I would like to ask Dr. McCoy some questions, if I may," T'Yana said.

"Fire a... I'll be pleased to answer anything I can," McCoy said amiably.

"Is it not true that Humans, and other non-telepathic races, fear the Vulcan abilities?"

"Fear of the unknown is very common. All the more reason for having Vulcans around. Once one has experienced Vulcan telepathy, one does not fear it any longer."

"You have experienced the link?"

Looking round the impassive faces, Kirk felt, suddenly, that this was important.

"Commander Spock once saved my life, and those of the Captain and Chief Engineer," McCoy said soberly, "and in doing so, also helped to convince the Melkotians to join the Federation. I don't need to emphasise the importance of that."

"We have heard, Captain, that you have experienced the link."

"Yes, several times. It has saved my life and my sanity."

"And you do not fear it?"

"No." Kirk could not add to the terse monosyllable. His melds with Spock had been right and beautiful, experiences to be kept in his heart, not shared with others, even with Vulcans who might understand.

T'Pau looked round the room. "Are there any others who wish to speak? You, Captain Kirk, have thee anything thee wish to say?"

"One thing only. I would like to remind you of your own IDIC, a symbol we respect greatly in Starfleet. We do not wish to lose out peaceful allies...and friends."

Her piercing black eyes bored into him, giving nothing away. "You remind us of our own philosophies, Captain?"

"Yes. With respect, I do."

She nodded, face immobile. "The Council will now debate. Captain Kirk, you and your crewmembers may withdraw."

As they left the room, McCoy blew out his cheeks in a soundless puff of relief. "Third degree isn't in it!" he muttered, and seeing Spock's eyebrows begin to move, added," "and no smart-alec remarks from you either, Spock. What do we do now?"

"There will be no decision by the Council for twelve days," Spock said. "We Vulcans do not rush headlong into anything, Doctor." He led the way out of the building.

"Well, are we expected to hang around doing nothing?" McCoy demanded.

"Until tomorrow at least," Spock replied. "Captain, I have spoken to T'Yana about the bonding; she will give me her answer this evening."

Kirk's eyes lit. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten."

"Bonding?" McCoy was puzzled.

"A joining of our minds, Doctor. It is not uncommon on Vulcan between two compatible minds. Then we will be able to contact each other at any time we wish it."

"But Jim isn't a telepath - he's virtually psi null!"

"It is not necessary that he should be. We already share a bond. I felt his thoughts on Vulcan when he needed me, and I returned to the Enterprise."

McCoy halted in his tracks, staring from one to the other. "You never told me about this bonding, Jim."

"I didn't know it was possible myself until a month or so ago," Kirk grinned at him. "Spock wasn't giving anything away when we first saw him again, remember?"

"But suppose you can't break the link?"

"The original fusion is monitored closely, and selected areas are... fined down to match completely. The link is then severed but can be made or broken at will. It is as much a defence against an accidental permanent bonding as anything else. I fear the day may come when I have to make a choice between saving the Captain's life or both of us living as a composite. I have found it difficult to break free in the past."

McCoy had a sudden vivid memory of the Vulcan's tortured face when he had broken Kirk's amnesia on the day Miramanee died. He looked from one face to the other. If this could work there would be no more parting between these two, and that was as it should be. Their closeness had been tangible before, to those who cared enough to see. He'd never really understood why Spock had gone, and now it seemed that he was prepared to admit, tacitly, his own needs. This was no time for teasing.

"Anything I can do?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm sure T'Yana will be pleased to have you watch the process - if she agrees to it," Spock said soberly.

McCoy gave a little grimace. "I'm not sure I stand too well in that lady's opinion, Spock. You should have told me who she was."

"Doctor, she is Vulcan, and she has worked with Humans. It is best that we know each other's ways, and try to understand them."

They reached their apartment, and Spock left to see T'Yana, while Kirk and McCoy went inside, grateful to be out of the stultifying heat that was Vulcan's normal daytime temperature, and stand under cool, cool showers.

Spock returned late in the evening and knocked at Kirk's door while he was sitting by an open window enjoying the cooler evening air.

"Come in. You've seen her?"

"Yes. She has agreed to help us."

Kirk patted a chair. "Sit down. I want to ask you something." Spock sat, politely waiting. "When you spoke of this earlier, you made it sound as though it was just a matter of coming here and that would be that. What's been the problem?"

"Human emotions, Captain."

"Whose? Mine...or yours?" He said it challengingly.

Spock did not react. "Yours, Captain. But now T'Yana has seen your considerable outward control, she believes it may work."

"My control?"

"Before the Council. You answered, as I knew you would, all the questions you were asked, openly and without irrelevant details."

"I have had some experience of dealing with Vulcans over the last few years,"

Kirk pointed out, unsure whether to be amused or annoyed.

"Yes." Spock rose to his feet. "I think my father showed his true ability as a diplomat when he asked for you personally."

Kirk laughed. "Deviousness, you mean."

Spock went to the door. "We are a practical race, Jim," he said quietly. "We pick the best...tool for the job."

The door clicked shut softly.

T'Yana greeted them in her office and invited them to sit. "Are your minds open to each other?"

"Captain Kirk's is to me, but he has not yet encountered or broken the blocks in mine."

"I see. Well, that was to be expected since the Captain is a non-telepath." She went to Spock, her fingers steepling. "Give me your thoughts, Spock." She paused briefly in the link, and withdrew. "Your mind is powerful, Spock, and well-ordered."

"I have studied long."

"With some success." She turned to Kirk. "Give me your thoughts, Captain."

He lifted his face with inward resolve; however the touch of her mind was just a flicker in his before she withdrew. She studied his face intently a moment, then turned to Spock.

"The will is very strong, Spock. Certainly there must be a bonding if you are to continue to use the meld, or before long the minds will not release each other."

"So I fear."

She turned back to Kirk. "I will meld with both, to see where we need to apply the pressure."

"Both!" McCoy was startled into speech. "Ma'am, isn't that dangerous?"

"I am trained for it," she assured him calmly. "And my name is T'Yana, not...Mahm."

"I know. Ma'am is a Earth word you use when you respect a lady a lot." It was the best apology he could think of.

She gave him a tiny, dismissive smile. "Come, then, all of you. We will go to the laboratory where we can monitor the brain-waves as we work."

She permitted McCoy to help her set the equipment ready, and showed Kirk where to lie. "Here, on your side, with Spock beside you, so. Then I can work from behind you and withdraw without disturbing you."

Kirk, suddenly unnaturally silent, laid himself down beside his friend and looked at him.

"Scared, Jim?"

He nodded tightly, realising to his surprise that it was so.

"There is no need for fear, but it is not too late to turn back."

Kirk gritted his teeth, shook his head, and covered Spock's hand surreptitiously, briefly, with his own.

"Are you both ready?"

"We are ready."

- Coolness. Peace. -

- Peace. Pleasure. -

- Both trusting. Open. Right for each other. Darkness here. You see? Break it. -

- I see it. I cannot break. -

- You must. Push. Harder. -

- I cannot. Hurt to him. -

- Hurt is necessary. Tear at it. Batter it down. -

- Break it, Jim. -

- I...cannot. -

"You must break that barrier, Captain, if we are to have any success." T'Yana helped him to sit up, and he swung his feet to the floor, his back to them.

"How can you ask me to do what I can see will hurt him?" he asked harshly, surprised at his own reaction to the block he had encountered.

"I must be hurt." Spock came round the couch to stand in front of him. "I am trying to help you break through, but you are holding back. You must use your will to push, not pull."

Kirk looked down at his feet, his mind swimming.

"You look rough, Jim," McCoy said suddenly. "T'Yana, what effect is this having on him?"

She studied her monitors and shook her head. "There is evidence of stress. You must not make another attempt today. Come back tomorrow, and get plenty of rest in the meantime, Captain."

Kirk slept exhaustedly for many hours, but woke to find himself strangely reluctant to face another attempt. He covered his apprehension and made light conversation as they shared their morning meal.

"That's quite some woman," McCoy told him appreciatively. "She's been very clear explaining what's necessary to be done, and how they do it."

"Yes?" Kirk didn't want to know, but equally, he was not about to let McCoy see. Nor was he going to show Spock his fear, although he knew his friend had been aware of it in the meld, and would be again. Then, it was different, a sense of belonging that transcended all the fears, doubts and uncertainties. Now, he would show the best face possible to them both.

"I'm glad you're here, then," he said pleasantly. "It's nice to see you all enthused."

McCoy grinned at him. "Never thought I'd be so happy on Vulcan! But I'm grateful for the air-conditioning in these rooms of ours. Very thoughtful people, Vulcans. Pity I didn't think to slip anti-gravs in my boots, though. My feet are killing me."

He waited for Spock to make some snappy retort, but the Vulcan's eyes were fixed on Kirk.

"Something wrong?" the Doctor asked.

"Wrong? Why should there be?"

"Well, Spock just turned down the chance of telling me no-one was ever killed by his own feet!"

Kirk laughed. "We may have other things on our minds, Bones. Sorry."

"I'm not," McCoy retorted. "It keeps him off my back!"

He submitted to the meld willingly enough, determined to break that barrier, but gently, so gently, not hurting.

It didn't work.

T'Yana released the link with a sigh. "Captain Kirk, you are learning too swiftly. You are blocking off areas from me, now, and I cannot help you it you do that. Spock, take the Doctor with you, and leave me alone with the Captain."

When they had gone, she came to sit beside him, studying his face. "Captain, fear is a very Human thing, and I not fully understand it, but even I can feel it in your mind. What is it that you fear?"

To betray him. Suddenly he understood. He thought back over the years with Spock, and how his Vulcan nature had become so right, so...Spock! Since V'ger, Spock had softened, mellowed. Had the tremendous blasts of energy his mind had sustained damaged him? Kirk was unsure of anything. He looked up at her calm, dark eyes, and decided upon a half truth.

"I fear to make him less than he is, less Vulcan."

"He is what he is. You cannot change him."

He dropped his eyes again. "I know so little of Vulcans. I find myself uncertain."

She nodded. "Fear of the unknown is understandable. Come and stay, with Spock, with my family, and get to know us well. Then we may make the attempt once more."

Although Kirk had briefly visited on Vulcan several times in the past, this was the first time he had spent more than a few days there at the most, and he welcomed the opportunity to get to know more of it. T'Yana's home was on the western outskirts of ShiKahr, set in shady gardens. Her husband, Senar, a young, vigorous Vulcan, some few years older than Spock, made them welcome.

"My home is yours, Spock, James." He gave the Vulcan greeting.

"We hold it as our own." Spock made the formal reply, signifying the privacy of the home he now shared would be as sacrosant as his own. "We come in friendship, to join your family."

Kirk had been warned that, staying in their house, he would become one of the family in every sense during that stay. The tightness of the family group was a surprise to him, and gave him an added understanding of the break Spock had made when he joined Starfleet against his father's wishes, becoming a stranger to them. He stepped to Spock's side, making the Vulcan gesture of greeting, grateful for the practice he had put in to perfecting it.

"Peace to us all." Senar smiled at each of them and led the way to the meal-table.

Mealtimes were strictly formal occasions, but pleasant for all that. T'Yana's three children were clearly curious about their Human guest, but equally clearly were not about to make their guest uncomfortable by any open show of interest. The two girls, one barely out of babyhood, the other adolescent, were delightful, but it was the son, Sunak, on whom Kirk's eye fell most frequently. The vulcanoids of Thul were so like Vulcans, and this child was almost unbearably like Tanar in appearance, though lacking the imperiousness of his charm.

With Spock's able help - after so many shared meals he knew Kirk's tastes - he made a pleasant meal, refusing such dishes as the Vulcan did not recommend.

"James once tried plomik soup," Spock explained to the youngest child, T'Plas. + "He found he did not care for it, although it is not harmful to Humans. However, there are dishes which he may not eat because his body will

+ Diplomatic Incident by Meg Wright, Log Entries 36, published by STAG.

not assimilate them, and some foods are poison to him, as some Earth foods would be to you."

Kirk had given a tiny, smothered grin at the memory of the plomik soup. Sunak caught the smile and eyed Kirk gravely. "It amuses you that you did not enjoy plomik soup?" he asked. "I do not enjoy agla-fruit, but it does not amuse me."

Kirk cast an apologetic look at T'Yana, he'd been so determined to cover any emotion he might feel. It was grossly unfair of Spock to have reminded him of that occasion.

"You had insufficient data, Sunak. My amusement was not for the fact that I do not like plomik soup, but at the memory of the only time I tried it."

"I see. But I still do not understand why it should be amusing."

"I'm not sure I could make you understand. All those present were Human except Spock. Our ways of thinking are different."

"That we have differences pleases us," T'Yana reminded him, gently. "Please explain."

O.K. She'd asked, he'd explain - for all the good it would do. "Sometimes my metabolism causes me to put on weight, and then I have to shed a few pounds. I don't enjoy it. Indeed, it is a well-documented fact that Humans, unlike Vulcans, become bad-tempered and unreasonable when they are burning up their own bodily food reserves. I became...annoyed with myself for having once again put myself in this position, and by a process of Human illogic, had managed to transfer my annoyance to the Doctor, who was only trying to help." He paused, conscious of the wide-open eyes of his three youngest listeners. "I know," he said deprecatingly. "Humans are very, very different from Vulcans."

"But not necessarily worse," the eldest girl, T'Senla, said calmly. "Please continue, James."

"Well, I got very mad at him, and complained that the diet I had been given was dull and lacked variety. Dr. McCoy has many ways of treating his patients, and to let them know that they could be much worse off than they are, is only one of them, so he agreed immediately that lack of variety was a problem, and promised a special delicacy at dinner that evening. It was a formal meal, given for the Federation Ambassador to Rigel Four, and McCoy ordered me the biggest bowl of plomik soup you've ever seen. And I had to drink it."

Sunak frowned. "And that memory amuses you?"

Kirk found himself floundering. How to explain to this solemn-eyed child the effect his own expression had had on his fellow-officers, the suppressed giggles that had threatened the formal decorum, the atmosphere of friendly understanding of his plight, and most of all, the sheer non-comprehension on Spock's face, that had all but completed his own fall into hysteria.

"It was...companionable," he said at last, "to know that others understood my problem. I had to restrain my laughter then, but my annoyance with the Doctor had changed to amusement, when I realised how neatly he had taught me not to grumble. It was a shared time."

Crazy to think this stumbled explanation would suffice, but Sunak's face had cleared. "A sharing among the family?" he asked.

"Yes. We are like a family aboard the Enterprise."

That was so true, and one of the things that made his ship, and his crew, so very special.

"Now I understand why the memory pleases you." Sunak was satisfied. "Mother, I have studies to complete, may I go to my room after our meal?"

"You may, my son."

They rose from the table, and all assisted in clearing away the meal. T'Yana

studied Kirk's face carefully. "You are still tired, James, and the heat and the gravity here distresses you. It is cool in the garden now; I suggest you sit our there for a while before you go to bed."

He agreed gladly, and went outside with Spock. Sitting out in the evening air, relishing the freshening night breeze, Kirk was reminded again of Thul.

"If I closed my eyes I could be back there. Just as hot, just as sticky, and just as hard on the feet!" He grinned at the Vulcan. "No wonder you were so at home there, Spock."

"I told you at the time the conditions were not unlike those on Vulcan," Spock reminded him. "I hope this time together will not end so disastrously."

"Disastrously? When it led to our first mind-link? Do you regret that, Spock?"

"Regret!" Spock said explosively. "I regret nothing, Jim, except the times you were in pain and I could not help, or when you were lost and I could not find you." He paused, visibly composing himself. "I do not regret even that I sometimes lack control where you are concerned."

He studied Kirk's face, but in the growing darkness he could not see the command the Human was holding so carefully, his resolution to shield Spock... at whatever cost to himself...hardening.

The next few days were spent pleasantly in Spock's company, visiting local places of interest, absorbing the calm, ordered atmosphere created by the quiet Vulcan people.

"You know, Spock," he said reflectively as they wandered round a delightful botanical garden. "I can't understand why we Humans set up such a resistance to the idea of taking shore leave on Vulcan. I've never known such tranquillity."

Spock paused momentarily in mid-stride, one eyebrow raised. To Kirk it was as though he reeled with astonishment. "Now what have I said," he complained, "to cause you to fall about like that?"

The second eyebrow joined the first. "I was unaware of having stumbled for any cause," Spock answered severely.

Kirk grinned at him amiably. "You can't fool me," he said complacently. "Why should you be surprised that I like your home?"

"Vulcan," Spock spoke carefully, "has all the peace you describe, but it has been my experience that peace is not what Humans seek when they go ashore. Indeed, several shore leaves in my recollection described to me as totally satisfactory, have been the complete reverse of peaceful!"

Kirk laughed. "Maybe you're right," he agreed. "Sometimes we need our pleasures a little less tranquil than others, but I'll still put in a word for Vulcan next time I get an opportunity. Is it tomorrow you go to visit Sarek and Amanda?"

"I have promised to do so. T'Yana thinks it best if you have some time alone with the family. You do not object?"

"Not a bit. You Vulcans make a guest feel so at home."

"A guest is at home."

"I know. But having it explained in abstract is one thing, and actually to find yourself drawn into the family bonds, quite another. I shall enjoy seeing more of the children. I guess most of us Starfleet bachelors like to find a surrogate child now and then."

Kirk was able to spend many hours in the children's company, and was delighted to be introduced to their sehlat, KaFali. Fully as cuddly and as

comforting as McCoy would have wished Spock's 'teddy-bear' to be, but equally possessing the six-inch fangs Spock had saved his reputation by mentioning. It wore them with a faintly apologetic air.

The youngest child, T'Plas, took him by the hand and led him round her world, clearly recognising that here was a person slightly less certain of himself than she was. She constituted herself his guardian, to guide him gently round the pitfalls of her own experience, proudly showed him her toys, charmingly made and subtly designed to encourage logical learning through play.

At mid-day, T'Yana called her to come in out of the sun's heat. She came reluctantly. "Mother, I wished to show James our exercise area."

T'Yana took her daughter's hand and touched their fingers in the gesture of affection. "James must not be out in the sun unnecessarily, T'Plas. His world is cooler than ours, and you will make him uncomfortable. Also, my t'ky'ta, it is time for you to make today's meditation. Go to your room, now, and I will come and help you."

Her lower lip trembled in a very Human way, and T'Yana touched it reprovingly. "T'ky'ta, there are other days."

She looked at her mother gravely, and then at Kirk. "I showed emotion. I ask forgiveness."

Her mother patted her head gently. "Within the family there is sharing. Go up, I will follow." Turning to Kirk, she said, "She is young yet, but she is learning."

He nodded his understanding. "There is much love within the Vulcan family, T'Yana, even if you call it by a more logical name. I can hear a Vulcan harp; it is a tape, or is it someone playing?"

"Sunak and T'Sehla are practising. Do you care to listen?"

"I should like that, if they wouldn't mind."

"Why should they mind? They are in their study, go in and join them."

He slipped in quietly and sat down, eyes closed, letting the music cool his mind, and wishing his body felt equally cool. At least he could shower as often as he wished, and did not have to try and live with an unwashed body as he had on Thul. It was the only time he had envied Spock's inability to sweat. The harp was evocative of peaceful evenings aboard the Enterprise, listening to Spock play. He relaxed, missing his friend slightly, but at peace. Without realising it, he slipped gently into sleep.

A stifled giggle snapped his eyes open. T'Sehla was looking at her brother disapprovingly. "Sunak, impoliteness is not sharing. You will make our guest uncomfortable."

"I doubt it." Kirk grinned, controlled, and sat up. "May I ask what has amused you?"

"I ask forgiveness." Sunak lowered his eyes.

"I experience no need to forgive, but I understand your need to ask. Please tell me what amused you. I too need to understand your people as you would like to understand mine."

"I have never seen a Human asleep before. I did not know that you closed your eyes. The unexpectedness made me react before I could control."

"I understand," Kirk said reminiscently. "The first time I realised Spock slept with his eyes open, I, too, was startled into unexpected emotion, but less pleasantly. You see, Humans always close their eyes in unconsciousness, unless they are dead, and I was rather relieved to find Spock was alive."

"This memory also amuses you?" Sunak asked, curiously.

"We are not a logical people. We do not smile only when we are amused. Release from tension, from worry, can also make us smile."

T'Sehla eyed him wisely. "It is the hardest of all," she confided, "to control the fears one has for family sharing."

"We call it love," Kirk told her softly, "but it is much the same."

Each evening on Senar's return, his children went out to greet him. Not the noisy, exuberent greeting of Human children, but there was a warm sense of unity nevertheless, and Kirk had enjoyed sharing the moment with them before. Each evening also, Senar spent some time alone with his children before the evening meal, and tonight he signed to Kirk to follow them. As they gathered round his chair, he set two fingers against his youngest child's.

"Now, my t'ky'ta, tell me of your day."

"I have been showing James my learning games," she said solemnly. "Father, James does not know how to play falar."

"His childhood was different, T'Plas."

"I know. He has told me a little. Father," her eyes grew round, "he has a brother who is only nine seasons older than he is."

It had been an awkward moment when he'd realised there was close on seven Earth years between her and her siblings, and that she was used to this kind of age difference.

"Terrans are different from Vulcans in many ways. Many of their children are closer in age even than James and his brother. Some of them are even twins."

"Twins?"

"Both born at the same time."

"Brothers?"

"And sisters."

She broke into a little chuckle, instantly checked by his gentle hand on her cheek. "I beg forgiveness." She looked solemn again. "I had to ask mother's forgiveness today. I showed emotion. I wanted to show James our exercise area, but the sun was too hot for him."

"You are forgiven." He drew his son forward. "And your day? Have you studied the passage you found difficult?"

"Yes, Father. T'Sehla helped me, and James came to listen. Father, Spock plays the harp for him."

"Then he knows how a Vulcan harp sounds in the hands of a master." Kirk felt a ridiculous surge of vicarious pride.

"Father, I too had to ask for forgiveness today. I was startled into laughter."

Senar gazed at him sternly. "My son, you are too old to be startled. What was the cause?"

Sunak gulped and put his hands behind his squared-off back. The gesture and the stance were so Spock on the defensive that Kirk had to bite his lips - hard.

"James fell asleep. His eyes were closed."

Senar looked grave. "Impoliteness is not sharing, my son. Were you forgiven?"

"Yes."

"Then all is well. T'Sehla?"

She came to his side. "I have completed my studies, Father, and I have made a dish for the evening meal. Kroyberries with hilva juice. I asked Spock before he left."

"Is it something James enjoys?"

"Yes, Father."

"That was well thought of. It is well, my children. Go, then, and help your mother."

When the door had closed, Kirk said, "I seem to have had a bad effect on T'Plas and Sunak. I, too, beg forgiveness."

"There is no need," Senar said indifferently, in a manner Spock often used to cover pleasure. "I am pleased the children have met you; we do not see many Humans."

"You have taken me into your home," Kirk said gratefully, "and I understand just what that means here. You must let me say how glad I am to be one of your family, even for such a short while."

Senar looked at him thoughtfully. "Sharing is not always easy," he said, "but you have made it so for us, James. It is not always the way."

"My people can be very insensitive sometimes," Kirk agreed. "You must remember that I have known Spock for many years."

Senar gave a brief smile. "My people also can be insensitive. It is good to be reminded that our ways are not the only ways. You are most welcome. Will you tell me a little of your life in Starfleet? I should be most interested to hear of your experiences."

It had been a comfortable evening, Kirk thought as he settled into deep, dreamless, restful sleep. It was pleasant to be so relaxed again, pleasant to greet Spock on his return from his parents' home, pleasant to be out of uniform for once. In the heat of Vulcan he had taken to wearing the Vulcan robe, a much cooler garment than his clinging shirt, and pleasant to see Spock in one of the old familiar blue of his old science shirt.

Sentimental idiot, he chided himself. Spock is Spock, whatever he is wearing, but that particular shade of blue brought back very pleasant memories.

He clung to those memories as they returned to the Academy, allowed them to fill his mind, blotting out the present worry. He found himself deeply afraid as they approached the meld once more.

- Fear? -

- Fear. I cannot break through. -

- You must. -

- Help me. -

- You fear for me. Do not. Nothing matters. -

- I cannot hurt you. -

- You can. You must. Break! -

- No. No. -

Spock withdrew his mind abruptly and turned away, shoulders rigid. The sudden loss shocked Kirk and frightened him.

"It will not do," Spock said harshly. "I cannot force the Captain to break this barrier against his will."

T'Yana shook her head. "You have come too far to turn back now," she told them sympathetically. "Captain, it is not that your mind is not strong enough to break through, you have become too powerful, and are resisting us too strongly."

Kirk looked at his friend's unyielding back. He had not seen Spock look like this since he had returned from his mind touch with V'ger. He sighed angrily. What had promised to be so right was becoming more like a nightmare. Well, he'd lived with Spock's outer coldness so long, secure in his inner knowledge of his friend. Why had they not left well alone? The past had been good enough, there was no need to be greedy for more. He shook his head.

"There's still tomorrow."

T'Yana inclined her head, but did not reply. As Kirk and Spock left the laboratory she called McCoy back.

"Can you spare me a little of your time, Doctor?"

"As much as you like. What can I do for you?"

"Come to my office. I wish to discuss this matter with you."

He sat down, feeling rather at a loss. He was still not a hundred percent sure how the process worked, and did not see how he could help.

"There is fear in the Captain's mind, but he is blocking it off from me, and I cannot see what it is that he fears. It cannot be the meld itself, or he could not consent to this at all. He told me he feared to alter Spock's nature, but although I have assured him he cannot do so, he continues to hide this area. You know him well; can you deduce what he is hiding?"

McCoy frowned. "He's always accepted Spock for what he is," he said slowly. "He saw, much earlier than the rest of us, how the poor devil is pulled two ways by his nature."

"Then that cannot be what he fears," she agreed.

McCoy frowned again, concentrating. "He tries to shield Spock," he said. "I guess it's something to do with that, and not something he himself is afraid of." He looked up. "Wait a bit, I think I might be able to guess. On the very few occasions Spock has shown emotion, Jim has been the first one to come between him and the rest of us, to help him until he could control. Do you think he is afraid, consciously or subconsciously, that Spock might show some reaction in front of us that he would regret?"

She considered this, then went straight to the heart of the matter. "Who has asked for your presence, is it Captain Kirk, or Spock?"

"Spock."

"He shows great trust in you, McCoy. It is pleasing he has found such friends."

He gave a grunt of laughter. "We haven't always sounded like friends, and I took a long time to get to know him. It's been worth it. Getting to know a Vulcan well isn't easy, you know."

Her eyes smiled. "We make a great show of our logic, do we not?" She sighed a little. "It is the right way for us, but we do fear contamination."

He nodded eagerly. "Spock has been more rigidly Vulcan than most. I realised that when I first met Sarek. He smiled more in one day than I had seen Spock do in two years. I think perhaps he was trying to show us we couldn't break his conditioning, but Jim somehow managed to reach him, and he never seemed to mind Jim knowing he was...feeling."

"I believe you may have answered my question, but you have not solved the problem. It does not matter if Spock displays emotion during this process. We do have emotions, Doctor, and to achieve a bonding them must be mutually understood and accepted."

"You can tell Jim till you're blue," McCoy growled. "The ornery so-and-so is very difficult once he's made up his mind. He's as stubborn as...as a Vulcan!"

She gave him a reproving look, but her eyes were twinkling. "In that case we must show him, Doctor." She stood up.

"What are you going to do?" He rose also

"Talk to Spock. He may be able to convince his friend there is nothing to fear."

McCoy said warily, "Jim's got a penetrating eye for falsehood."

"There will be no falsehood," she assured him, "but drastic problems require drastic solutions, and believe me, Doctor, this problem is becoming very serious indeed for them both."

T'Yana finished her explanation and looked up at Spock sympathetically. "Can you convince your friend you are unhappy at his failure?"

Spock looked at her stonily. "If you wish me to act this out for you, then you know that it is doomed to failure. I am a Vulcan by upbringing, even though I am genetically half Human. I could no more act out a strong emotion than I can now deny I possess them."

She permitted herself a smile. "I had faith in your Vulcan half as well as your humanity, Spock. I am not sure, even now, these Humans understand the joy of the bonding, how we are almost tempted to envy those who share such an affinity outside the family. Well, we must put him to the test, then, a severe one. Are you prepared to take the risk?"

"I have no wish to die, but I understand. What must be done will be done without shrinking."

"You wear the IDIC, Spock," she said softly. "This will increase your understanding of it greatly. I will be open with you, if you will permit it? I do envy you."

He bowed his head.

- Spock? Where? -

- I am here. -

- Greater darkness. Spock, I do not understand. Fear. -

- Why fear? Surging anger. Why fear? -

- Shame. -

- No need. Break. -

- I cannot. -

- You mean you will not. Sorrow. -

- Untrue. Spock! Spock? Where? -

- I am here. Tired. -

- Tired? -

- Of waiting. Despair. Break. Break! -

- I CANNOT. -

- Despair. Leave. LEAVE. T'hy'la... -

The world surged back...to strong hands holding his arms, bruising, hurting. The dark eyes were wet, and one, fat tear was trembling on the gaunt cheek.

"Spock!" Shock forced the name from Kirk.

Abruptly, Spock broke free and rolled away to sit up with his back to Kirk. Oblivious of watching eyes, Kirk took the shaking shoulders in his hands.

"Spock?"

Spock shook himself free, stood up to face them defiantly. "I am sorry."

He closed his eyes and turned aside. "I must leave."

He stumbled as he went.

Rage, blind, red, furious rage filled Kirk. The one thing he now realised he had feared above all others had happened... Well, he didn't care what T'Yana thought, if it shocked her Vulcan mind out of a hundred years' growth, he was going to let rip!

"How dared you?" His voice shook. "How dared you? You were monitoring the link, T'Yana, you saw that coming. Why didn't you stop it?"

"Why didn't you?" she countered, quietly.

"I? I'm not a telepath. I keep telling you I cannot do it, and you've made us go on. Why didn't you stop it before it went this far; how could you let him break like that? He's a Vulcan. You're a Vulcan. You know what it can do to him. How dared you?"

"You have said what you felt you must," she said calmly, "now pause and listen to what I have to say, Captain Kirk. You did that to him, not I. I did not reject him. You would not enter where he asked, and you alone must bear the blame for what has happened."

His whole body tensed. "I did not reject him."

"You have. You have been afraid, and you did not trust him enough to believe him just now, when he told you he was in despair. I wonder if this bonding will work, when you can deny him in the meld."

"I DID NOT DENY HIM," Kirk thundered, pounding the couch. "You have been with us in the meld."

"Yes. You have the strongest mind of any Human I have encountered," she said quietly. "You have set up blocks against both of us. Blocks that may become as strong as this of Spock's. What will you do then, Captain? Shut him out selfishly, or seek selfishly to hold him within your mind forever while you deny him access to you?"

"I can't do that!"

"You can, and you are. James, be kind to him. Force that barrier open."

The agony in his chest threatened to overwhelm, despair shook him.

"I? I'm to blame?" His voice displayed surrender.

"Yes, Jim." McCoy came forward to stand at T'Yana's shoulder. "You've not been open with us. Why didn't you tell us you were afraid of some reaction?" Kirk shook his head numbly. "Sometimes you are a fool. Couldn't you see how much he'd changed?"

"Yes," Kirk replied hesitantly. "I was afraid it might be the after-effects of V'ger. His mind must have taken tremendous energy in that mind-touch, Bones."

"Indeed it did," T'Yana agreed. "Enough to make him understand what he had been searching for all these years, James."

"What should I do?"

"Nothing today. But, I warn you, the next attempt must be the very last, unless you succeed. I must emphasize that. Give me your thoughts."

He raised his face submissively to her hand.

- Here, do you see? -

- My mind is changed? -

- Yes. Here. And here. Too powerful. Release. James, release! -

- I...let go. -

Her eyes looked gravely into his. "Do you understand now? There is no

affinity in our minds, and yet you can hold me. Unless you break that barrier tomorrow so that the final shaping can be made, the two of you will never break free from the next meld, but will be a composite, living out each other's lives simultaneously. Two humanoids cannot function so. It will end in madness for you both."

He swallowed his fear. "I understand."

McCoy waited for him to leave. "Boy! That was quite an act. I was afraid you'd never convince him."

She shook her head, pity deep in her eyes. "It was not an act, Doctor, not from me and not from Spock. I am afraid it was all quite real."

"You mean it really is next time or never?"

"Yes."

McCoy's shoulders slumped.

She touched him lightly. "We will think of a way, Doctor, but it will not be an easy path." She studied his face. "There must be suffering for both of them, I'm afraid, but out of it, much may be gained."

"Bones!"

An urgent hand shaking his shoulder. He turned away from it and tried to recapture his dream.

"Bones, wake up. We have a problem."

He opened protesting eyes. "What problem?"

"They're evacuating ShiKahr. Get up!"

"Evacuating...?" He came wide awake. "What's happening?"

"I'm not sure yet. Spock's gone to get more details. I think that's him coming in now. Get dressed and join us." He went out into the main room to find Spock there. "What's it about, Spock?"

"The Geomorphological Institute have warned there is a serious landslip imminent in the I-langdon Mountains. It will engulf ShiKahr. They have begun the evacuation."

"It must be going to be a gigantic fall."

"It is not only one fault. As the upper area of the mountains goes in a rock slide, it will set off successive rotational slips. They have only been able to give us one day's warning. I shall go and help the evacuation work."

Kirk grabbed his arm. "Wait, get me a subspace radio, Spock! We can get the Enterprise here. There must be something we can do."

Spock's face cleared. "I had not thought of the Enterprise. Yes, her help would be invaluable. Come with me."

"McCoy!" Kirk yelled in his best quarter-deck voice. "Come on - AT THE DOUBLE!"

McCoy skidded out of his bedroom, still struggling into his shirt, and followed them at a run, breathlessly seeking information as he went.

Using her top speed, the Enterprise was in synchronous orbit within half a day. Ordering all shuttles down to assist, Kirk beamed aboard with full details of the imminent disaster to direct operations. Going into a huddle with Scott and Chekov in the briefing room, he pointed out the relevant area.

"It's those rocks there that are about to go, Scotty."

Scott looked at the screen in horror. "That's half a mountain, sir, and it's

no' a small one, either."

"Yes, I know. We'll use phaser power to take out this area here, you see, Mr. Chekov?" He pointed. "But not until everyone there has been got out. Spock is directing the shuttles down there and will let us know when we can get to work. Until then, tractor beams to hold it."

"We canna hold the whole mountain, sir," Scott protested.

"No. This area, here, is the most important. Get to it, Scotty. Any questions, Mr. Chekov?"

"I don't think so, sir." The young lieutenant studied the acreen intently. "It'll take some pretty precise work to make sure we don't make things worse."

"Yes," Kirk agreed. "Mr. Spock will be in the area reporting on the effect we're having."

Chekov showed a horrified face. "Not too close in, I hope, sir, it'll be a wide spread."

"I hope not too, Mr. Chekov." Kirk grinned, although he'd never felt less like doing so. "I wouldn't like to be in your shoes if you winged him."

"Sir?" Chekov was bewildered.

"Got too close for comfort. Singed him a little. Ruffled his Vulcan dignity."

"I wouldn't mind if that was all I did," Chekov muttered. "You'll tell him to be careful, sir?"

Kirk patted his shoulder. "You try telling him, Mister. I've got a healthy respect for my skin!"

They made their way to the bridge. "Any word from Spock yet, Uhura?"

"Just coming in now, sir."

"Good. Put him on audio."

"I am in the foothills, Captain, and we believe everyone in the area has been accounted for."

"Good. Tractor beams are maintaining the equilibrium..."

"Not for much longer, Captain," Scott broke in warningly. "Sensors read a build up of stress in the north-west edge; it'll shear very soon now, and we canna keep the whole of it in the beam."

"Did you hear that, Spock?"

"Affirmative."

"Right, vacate the area. Report as soon as you're clear."

"Understood."

The Scotsman's half-heard Gaelic imprecations as he struggled to control the beam grated Kirk's stretching nerves.

"Come on, Spock," he muttered. "Get out of there, what's keeping you so long?"

"Captain," the voice was as calm as ever, "I have to land. There are two people still in the area."

"She'll never hold, sir," Scott protested. "Two minutes at the most."

"You've got two minutes, Spock. Don't try to pick them up. Give us their co-ordinates, we'll beam them aboard here."

"Going in now, Captain."

Kirk's eye watched the chronometer tick the seconds away. "Spock!" he pleaded.

"Transporter room has the co-ordinates, sir," Uhura reported.

"Energise!" Kirk snapped, and at Uhura's nod, "Spock, they're safe. Get out of there!"

"On my way, Captain."

"She's going, sir."

"Ready, Mr. Chekov."

"Ready, sir, but Mr. Spock..."

"No time." Kirk seemed to be standing in a well of emptiness, time stretching out into infinity while the world rushed past him. "Fire phasers." His voice was steady.

The deadly power of the phasers whirled the massive rocks into nothingness, creating turbulence, flows, whirlpools in the surrounding air.

"Sir," Uhura said shakily, "I've lost contact with Mr. Spock."

"Secondary shear going now," Scott said tiredly. "I canna stop it."

"What line is it on?"

"The city'll be safe, sir, but they'll lose this year's crops on the western terrace."

"A few crops." Kirk shrugged it away. "Any word from Spock?"

"No, sir. He reported the shuttle had gone out of control...then nothing."

"Sensors?"

Sulu was at the library console. "It's crashed, sir. Life-reading there, but very weak...no, I've lost it." His head turned slowly, stricken eyes looking at Kirk. His Captain could not see them.

"Sir," Scott's strained voice interrupted them, "that west side of the mountain reads much wetter than predicted; there may be a plug mudflow forming between the shears. The western side of ShiKahr is still not safe."

"Uhura, contact all shuttlecraft, update them on the situation and tell them to ensure everyone is out of the area. We'll arrange beam-up for those they can't manage."

The next hours were a whirl of activity, giving him no time to think; co-ordinating rescue work, liasing with the Vulcan geomorphologists to divert the mudflow into a safer channel; having a few brief seconds to bless the calmness and co-operation of the Vulcan refugees on board his ship; encountering T'Pau sitting calmly in the rec room surrounded by a group of wide-eyed children listening to her placid and lucid explanation of events; sinking at last into the command chair as the sitaution came under control.

"We've done it, sir." Chekov spoke in a cracked whisper. "The channel we've made is holding." He took his iron-steady hands from the phaser controls and was surprised to find them shaking. He dropped their treachery into his lap, a sharp pricking in his eyes now that stress was gone. "I'm...I'm sorry, sir."

"Not your fault, Lieutenant." Kirk's body felt numb. "Well done, everybody. Uhura, are they ready to take our visitors back down?"

"Yes, sir." Her eyes were swimming. Kirk looked away and stood up.

"Then I'll go and speed them on their way. Mr. Sulu, continue sensor search of the crash area. Update me as soon as you have anything at all. The Enterprise has to get back to her own work; we'll do what we can here to find him." He went to the rec room.

Beamdown completed, the Enterprise returned reluctantly to her survey work, forced to take all the remaining shuttles with her. Kirk and McCoy returned to their apartment, exhausted and dishevelled. McCoy looked at Kirk's drawn features.

"He'll turn up, Jim. He always does."

Kirk shook his head. "I don't know, Bones. I've given them the co-ordinates of the crash. We'll have to wait and see."

After some hours T'Yana came to them, face a mask. Kirk knew that look too well. It was the Vulcan cover for serious concern.

"He's missing?"

"Yes. The shuttle has been found. There is no sign of Spock."

Kirk reached a hand to the nearest steadying wall, lips white. "What can we do?"

"We have inaugurated a search. Everything it is logical to do will be done. I suggest you take the opportunity to rest."

"Rest!" Kirk said explosively when she was barely out of hearing. He closed his lips tightly over all the rest he wanted to say. It was unfair to let McCoy bear the brunt of his worry, and more than useless to express it to any Vulcan. He knew, better than any other Human probably, that they would do all they could. He let McCoy lead him back into the coolness of the bedroom, and attempted to rest, frustration bubbling within him as it always did when he was forced into inaction. The long night dragged by without any word. Kirk savagely told himself that wasting time passing on negative news was illogical, but it didn't help. He wanted desperately to be up and doing himself.

McCoy sat in a chair and watched him, worry lines etching themselves deep into his face. He wondered if Kirk, too, had thought of Spock's great knowledge of his desert world. He knew Spock well enough by now to have a healthy respect for his proven abilities. Spock never over-estimated himself, nor under-estimated either if it came to that. McCoy thought sickly of the superb training lessons in desert survival the Vulcan had given in the past. Easier not to think, simpler to sit back and endure.

The long night passed. Dozing fitfully on the chair in Kirk's room, McCoy knew that the too-still figure on the bed had not slept. In the morning, T'Yana came to them again.

"We have done all we can. There is no further use in continuing."

"You're giving up," Kirk snarled.

"There is no logic in searching further," T'Yana said patiently. "We know how long a person can survive alone out there, we know how far they can go, and we have searched the relevant areas. Beyond these limits there is no logic in searching."

"Logic!" Kirk said it explosively. "Is it certain which way he went after the crash?"

"Traces have been found, yes."

"Then I'll go and search, if you've given up."

"We have only given up because there is..."

"No logic in continuing. I know," he interrupted her rudely, uncaring. "Well, I'm not a logical creature, and I shan't give up until I've seen his dead body. I'll take a desert flier, find him and bring him back. Or would you prefer I left him to rot in the desert?"

"He is in the mountains," she said coldly. "You can only take a desert flier to the foothills. You will have to go on foot after that, and then there will be two dead instead of only one."

"No. I know he isn't dead."

"You cannot know. The link is not yet made."

"Damn the link!" he shouted furiously. "And damn all Vulcan logic and Vulcan certainties. I need my own Human certainties, T'Yana. I'm going to find him."

"Very well. But you cannot expect us to risk our lives to no purpose."

"I don't," he said, more gently. "I'll go alone."

McCoy came to his side. "I'll go with you."

"No. Bones, I'm sorry, I have to do this alone."

McCoy turned appealing eyes to T'Yana. She shook her head at him, eyes expressing a warning, and suddenly he understood. Hope flared in him. He'd put in his own little bit of needling.

"But Jim, you know Vulcans, better than any of us. If they say Spock is dead then there's no point in rushing out there into danger." He hid his crossed fingers behind his back.

"Too bad," Kirk told him curtly. "I'm going, and that's that. If I don't come back either..." He put a gentle hand on McCoy's shoulder. "I can't take another parting, Bones. Don't you understand?"

McCoy nodded and turned aside, blinking, containing the hot rush of tears.

T'Yana drove the flier out to the foothills and gravely handed Kirk out a survival kit. "That will last you for four days, then you will need more water. You have your communicator and tricorder?"

"Yes. I'll call in when I find him."

"Very well. If you find him, we will come and fetch you both."

"If he's dead you needn't come," he said softly. "Goodbye, T'Yana. Goodbye, Bones."

"Take care, Jim." McCoy could not prevent his voice shaking.

"I'll try. Don't worry." He held up his hand in the Vulcan salute and left.

"Will he find him?"

"We know what has happened and are monitoring them both," she reassured him. "But if James does not get to him in time then they will both die, Doctor."

"When you say drastic," McCoy groaned, "you sure mean drastic."

"Why, yes." She set the flier in motion. "We usually say what we mean. It saves a lot of trouble."

"You didn't organise a landslide just for this, surely?"

"Hardly, Doctor. But circumstances played into my hands. I got a message to Spock after the shuttle crashed. Now, we have to wait."

Kirk had been on his way less than an hour before he was exhausted. Even on the lower levels of the plains the air on Vulcan was thin for Human lungs, here in the mountains it was agony. Only determination and desperation drove him on throughout the heat of the day. When dusk fell at last, he set up camp for the night, forcing himself to eat sensibly from the survival rations. Then he wrapped himself in one of the lightweight blankets and lay back looking at the stars. Impossible not to think of Spock when looking out into the infinity if the night sky. He set himself to remember the years they had shared together, their growing friendship in the early days, the dangers, the terrors, the tight corners...even the fun. Yes, the logical, up-tight Vulcan had been fun for those

with eyes to see the quiet humour. Such comradeship and love. He'd not sought to deny to himself that what he felt for Spock was sheer, genuine, old-fashioned love. Now, he was facing yet again the possibility that his friend might be dead. The agony they had hoped to end was with him once more, and it was his own damn stupid fault. Why had he fought so hard not to break down that barrier against him? Was it really fear? He searched his own mind, reaching deep within. Spock had said his mind was totally open to him. Was it possible there was something within him that Spock could see but he could not? Why had he been afraid?

Impatiently, he threw an arm over his eyes, blocking out the stars that gazed too impassively back. The answer was not out there, it was here on Vulcan, locked up within Spock's mind...or his own. And if his friend was dead indeed, as they told him, then he would never know the answer.

- Spock! -

He stilled the mental cry at its birth. He dared not take the risk that he might reach Spock. Once more, T'Yana had said, or condemn each other to madness. He must wait until he found him, and he <u>was not dead</u>. He would not have him dead.

He spoke the words aloud into the cold night, and having spoken his defiance, slept.

McCoy scowled at the two blips shown on the screen. "It'll take him at least two days to find him," he said as calmly as his worry would permit. T'Yana nodded. "Is Spock still alive?"

"He is in deep trance," she said steadily. "If James finds him, he must break it or Spock will die."

"But Jim can't initiate a link!"

"With Spock he can by now. But if he cannot draw Spock back, if he cannot break that final barrier, then Spock will draw him down into his death." She looked swiftly at the open horror on McCoy's face and away again. "Please understand, Doctor, we are not unaware of the mental pain you are enduring, but neither are we unaware of the affinity those two have for each other. Logic tells us they should be bonded, logic has also shown that we had to act if we were to help them. Spock knew he must make James understand the seriousness of the situation. He realised that only the real threat of his death would make James properly whole again. He is prepared to die for that."

There was nothing McCoy could do but watch and pray.

Kirk woke with the sun and was quickly on his way. The terrain was so difficult that there was only one path the Vulcan could have used. He only had to detour a little from time to time to check out the way that must be taken... with the tricorder to aid him he would not miss Spock behind some rock, unless he was no longer... He blocked the thought quickly.

As he paused to drink and eat at midday, he regretted that the air did not seem to be any cooler up here in the mountains. He'd never been so hot; the heat was unimportant. He took one last sip from the water bottle and replaced the cap firmly. The scorching, white-hot sun slid past its zenith and began its slow journey down into the night, He rose to his feet, settled the carrying bag across his shoulders and moved on, restlessly searching the sparkling rocks and the tricorder readings. Many times he had to blink before his tortured eyes could see the figures it presented. Damn the sunlight. He blinked again, and dashed the drops away with his sleeve. Not tears, it was no time to give way to tears, not tears, no.

His feet were swollen inside his boots, undoubtedly badly blistered by now. He forced his mind away from the pain. It was unimportant. His robe was soaked

with sweat, the light shirt adhering to his back, sand grains rubbing sores upon his skin. He moved on, grimly pushing one foot in front of the other through the red sand that covered the rocks, checking the tricorder regularly, still unable to see any life form registering on...

Blue! There! There in the distance. Blue! The bright, light, familiar blue of the old-style science shirt. Half sobbing, half laughing, he ran to fall on his knees beside the still figure, caressing him with sweat-soaked, sand-grimed hands, finding no movement, no hope, no life. In agony, he cowered down to wait for death beside him.

Deep within him the 'beast' that he had accepted back within himself so long ago stirred. He'd seen his own savagery, knew the raging, cowardly creature that lived beside his gentler nature. Now it roused and cried its pain. It could not lose Spock, dared not lose him, could not live without him. He accepted the creature gratefully; he would not lose Spock if it took all the ruthlessness of which he knew himself to be capable. Beating down tenderness, he lifted his head from the unmoving breast. He'd seen Spock in deep trance before, there was no reason why this was any more than that. He would not have it more. He would rouse him if it killed them both.

With a sound that was half snarl, half sob, he reached for Spock's mind.

- Deep. Deeper. Darkness. Spock! -

- -

Come to me. Come. You live! -

- -

- Damn you! Come to me. Come. Deeper. -

- -

- No. You cannot die. I need you. Come. -

- -

- Come! -

- -

- Very well. To your life, or my death also. -

- -

- Deeper. -

- Sadness...lost... -

- Spock? Love. Love. -

-Lonely, dying, no... Jim? -

- Spock. Laughter. Tears. Come back! -

- Follow me. -

- No. Come back. Come back! -

- Blackness. -

- NO. NO DARKNESS. NO. RIP IT ASIDE. -

- Jim, you are here. -

- Here? -

- You have broken the barrier. -

- Joy. Flooding. No time now. Later. Come back. -

- Yes. Later. Lead me back. -

- Take my hand. Hold me. -

- I follow. Into the light. -

The dark eyes were still closed. Gritting his teeth, Kirk drew back his hand and slapped the thin cheek ruthlessly, again and again. "Damn you, Spock, you're staying with me - I need you."

A hand touched his wrist. "It is done."

Exhausted, Kirk sat back and lifted his friend's head into his lap, touching the silken hair gently, trembling with the release of so much tangled feeling.

"Sleep, Spock."

"May I have a drink first?"

Kirk controlled his shaking hands with difficulty and opened a water bottle. Spock drank a little, then motioned it away.

"That is sufficient," he whispered. "Now I will sleep. Stay with me, Jim."

"Just try and stop me." He shook out the blankets, wrapped Spock carefully in one, then took out the communicator.

"T'Yana?"

"You have found him. Alive?"

"Yes. All's well. Can you find us?"

"We have your co-ordinates. We will come for you. Sleep well, now, both of you."

He put the second blanket round his own shoulders, lifted Spock into his arms, settled him comfortably and lay back to wait. Sleep? Waste the hours when he could savour this fierce, surging joy? Ridiculous!

McCoy's face swam into his vision and out again. He felt Spock lifted from his loosened grasp and sought to hold him close.

"Let go," McCoy said gently. "We can't lift you both at once. Let go, and then we'll give him back to you."

Reluctantly, he let them take him, felt himself lifted also and tried to waken, but exhaustion claimed him. He was laid down somewhere soft and Spock was put back into his arms. He gave a sigh of pure relief, gathered him close and slept again.

The dream took shape, the formless darkness lightening. Wrapped in a warm cocoon of pure love he was held and was holding. He had lost and had found. In his dream he laughed from sheer joy. Fountains sparkling in sunlight. Children playing; soft birdsong. Peace.

McCoy watched the smile playing on Kirk's sleeping mouth. Spock's face was hidden as he slept, but the lean figure was relaxed, acquiescent. He looked up at T'Yana.

"I can't help but envy them, you know."

"It is given to few to find such completeness," she agreed. "We can leave them now. Come, you must be tired yourself. I do not believe you have slept much over the last three nights."

He followed her from the room. "No." He smiled. "Not the first time I've ever envied you Vulcans. I'm glad it's all ended well."

"The final adjustments have still to be made," she reminded him, "but they will succeed now."

"There's one thing you can explain before I go to bed. How could Jim reach

Spock, has he become a telepath?"

"No. He will never be able to initiate a link with anyone else, but the affinity between these two was tremendously strong, even before we began this bonding. Now the ways are open a little, and when they are bonded, together they will have a very powerful ability."

"How common is this?" he asked hesitantly, unsure if he was intruding in areas a Vulcan would consider private.

"Not common, but not unknown between two Vulcans. Mostly such compatability is found in the marriage bond, but it is not so unusual between two men. It is very rare indeed between two females, and, up to now, never achieved between a Vulcan and an alien. If you will permit me to express this openly, I envy them also."

He closed his dropping jaw. "Thank you for saying that. I find it a great compliment. But I'm still not sure I understand why you envy them."

"To achieve such complete sharing with another species is to live totally within the IDIC," she said softly. "That is desired much by us. To live within the IDIC is as valued as the Kolinahr, and as difficult to attain. We of Vulcan respect Spock greatly for all he has achieved. He is a son we can be proud of, although few of us would say it aloud. "

"Well - " he paused outside the door of his own room " - I've said all along that Spock should drop his reserve a little, but I never really hoped to live to see it happen." He yawned suddenly, widely, aching for sleep. "I'm sorry, T'Yana." He grinned. "Maybe I'll get Spock to teach me a few good Vulcan manners one day."

She raised an eyebrow. "You too live within the IDIC, McCoy. It is well. Rest now."

They woke together, each aware of the other's presence. They moved, breaking the embrace in which they had slept, reluctant to let go but needing to stretch aching muscles. Kirk felt an unaccustomed, unexpected shyness wash over him, subsiding slightly as Spock's head turned to study him, all masking gone, his face open and relaxed. He smiled, and saw the answering smile light Spock's eyes.

"I've spent some good nights in my time," Kirk teased gently, "but it takes a Vulcan tucking-up to show what can be done!"

Spock's mouth quivered. "Are you so sure a Vulcan tucked us in? It is more likely to have been McCoy."

"Logic dictates he was not alone," Kirk said airily. "He's not strong enough to lift us into bed unaided." His smile faded again. Just what had the Vulcan thought, he wondered.

Spock's lean fingers touched his face gently. "Still worried?"

"I was...h...wondering what they thought about us."

One eyebrow lifted. "That we were tired and needed sleep. That is the only logical reason for putting us to bed."

"Together?" The thought was out before he had time to stop it.

"We needed to be together, therefore it would be illogical to part us," Spock said calmly. "Are you embarrassed, Jim?"

"I guess I am. Sorry, Spock."

His friend smiled. "There is no need to apologise. I, too, find the situation a little unnerving - but then I am less accustomed to waking in another's arms."

Kirk choked, torn between laughter and gasping astonishment. The laughter won. He broke, and laughed until he cried.

"Ah," Spock said contentedly. "I have not made you do that for a long, long time."

McCoy poured their breakfast coffee and studied them with satisfaction.

"Stop looking like the cat that got the cream," Kirk told him shortly.

McCoy's smile widened and his blue eyes opened in his innocent stare. "Don't begrudge me a little simple pleasure, Jim. In fact, taking it all in all, looking at it this way and that, I've only one regret."

Kirk knew he shouldn't ask. "What's that, Bones?"

The smile impossibly widened further. "I had no leaves to cover you both up with, my babes in the wood."

No. He shouldn't have asked. Rigidly controlling his rising giggles, he got up from the table with dignity. "McCoy, one day you will apply your psychology too well, and then where shall we be?"

McCoy grinned wryly. "Too much display of open emotion is bad for Humans as well as Vulcans, Jim. I thought maybe we needed to defuse the affair a little."

Kirk raised an eyebrow, a sensation he'd always enjoyed, it reminded him so vividly of Spock. "You're a little late, Bones," he said, smiling across at his friend. "Your logical Vulcan has already applied his superior mind to the matter of bringing me back down to earth, and no - " he flung up a forestalling hand " - I shan't tell you what he said, it might make you blush!"

Dignity still enfolding him, he led the way out of the room.

This time there was no inner reluctance as he settled himself on the couch beside his friend.

"I shall simply monitor the connections you make today," T'Yana reminded them, "so that tomorrow the final adjustments can be made to allow you to call each other's thoughts without physical contact. We are ready now. You may begin the meld."

McCoy swallowed hard as the two friends lifted their free hands to each other's faces. He cast a swift, half-embarrassed glance at T'Yana. Her face was not giving much away, but enough. He gave a sigh of content. The silence deepened, broken only by the throbbing hum of the monitors.

- T'hy'la. -

- Laughter. What is t'hy'la? -

- Surprise at ignorance. Friend. Brother. Lover. -

- Lover? Surprise also. Unforseen. -

- Amusement. Vulcan has fewer words for these things. It may express them all, but not necessarily at once. -

- Stop teasing! -

- I merely copy. -

- I know. Don't stop. -

- Contradiction. -

- Yes. Human. -

- Yes. Understanding grows. -

- And grows. Contentment. -

- Come deeper. Search every part. -

- I follow. Here. Here was darkness. -

- Yes. Follow. -

- I follow. Edith. Sorrow. -

- Yes. Understood. You loved her. -

- Yes. Peace now. Deeper. Miramanee. -

- You loved her less. -

- Yes. Not as myself. It still hurt. -

- Understood. She sacrificed for you. -

- Reena? Spock, all my loves? -

- Yes. Deeper. -

- Deeper. Lenore? I never loved her, only pity. -

- Deeper. Still deeper. -

- Ruth. Janice. Shahna, Nona. Kelinda. Drusilla. Elaan. Deela. Odona... Spock, stop, stop! -

- Look closer. -

- Embarrassed. Am I <u>that</u> bad? -

- Look closer. -

- I didn't love them all. -

- Understood. I am open. Search. -

- You were ashamed of me? Jealous? You? -

- Jealousy is negative. I had to block it deeply. Unworthy. -

- Understood. No need for shame. <u>I</u> feel the shame. -

- No need. You are as you are. I accept. -

- Acceptance also. As ever. T'hy'la. -

- T'hy'la? -

- Well, two ways! -

- Amusement, release. -

- We release. -

The laughter was still in Kirk's eyes as the world came back. He shook his head slightly. "You wait, my friend, you wait!"

"I am a Vulcan. Patience is part of my conditioning."

T'Yana switched off the monitors. "Your part is done for today. McCoy, will you stay and assist me to make the final settings?"

McCoy's eyes gleamed. "I'd be honoured. I'll see you two at the evening meal."

"Very well."

"Until tonight," Kirk agreed. Outside the laboratory he paused. "Where now, Spock? I warn you, I want a long, long talk with you. No holds barred. Where shall we go?"

Spock's eyebrows touched his hairline. "I was about to suggest a walk, Jim, but if there is to be holding as well as talking..."

"That's quite enough." Kirk suppressed a broad grin as a group of Vulcans went by. "Talking will do, and you knew what I meant as well as I did!"

The dark eyes gleamed. "Your Human ways of speech are very illogical."

"But they give you a lot of innocent pleasure," Kirk retorted. "At least, I always thought they were innocent...until now! Where shall we walk to?"

"The desert is empty. We shall be private there, if it is not too hot for you."

"I can take it, especially if we can find shade at midday." Spock nodded. "Very well. Lead on."

They collected water bottles and set off together in companionable silence. In spite of the sweltering heat and his poor illtreated feet, and the shattering revelations of the morning's meld, Kirk had strangely never felt more at peace in his varied life. They walked without talking for an hour or so, then Spock pointed to a smudge of shade ahead.

"A water hole. There will be fruit growing that you can eat."

"Lovely idea. I'm getting hungry. Why does strong emotion always make you hungry?"

"I knew there was more than one sensible reason to control emotion," Spock commented. "If you could learn emotional control, naybe you would not have to endure McCoy's plomik soup!"

"Devil!" Kirk said with feeling.

The trees were enormous succulents, more resembling cacti than their earthly equivalents, but they made a deep and welcome shade, and the sand beneath them was cool instead of burning. Kirk welcomed the feel of it on his sweating back as he settled down against one of the few spine-free specimens. Spock lowered himself down beside him and stretched out his long legs.

"Now, Mister," Kirk said in his command voice. "Talk!"

Spock hesitated. "I am unsure of where to begin."

"Try the beginning," Kirk suggested hopefully.

"At the beginning," Spock said softly, "there was a young, oh so young, Captain, who didn't know much about Vulcans, but who was willing to learn, and who reached out through the coldness and sought...no, demanded, response. You came to Thul with me, risking your first command to work under my direction. You followed where I led and never complained of the discomfort and humiliation you endured. You gained my respect, and then my concern when you were injured. I rationalised my response. You were under my orders, it was my duty to see that you were safe. It became my pleasure to care for you. You touched my humanity, and then I retreated deep into my conditioning. But then you put your life at risk for mine, and I further rationalised. If I was to bring you back alive, I must open myself to you a little. I knew the meld could save your life, and found myself prepared to let you see me as I was."

"I'll never forget," Kirk almost whispered it. "You became...very special."

"I was aware of it, and as the years went by I found my Human half easier to live with. I could maintain the outer, Vulcan image, with others, never with you, Jim. You awakened feelings in me I had forgotten I could experience."

"Dear God." Kirk drew up his knees, cradled his arms about them to hide his face. "And I was proud of my Vulcan friend, proud that I did not ask you to be less Vulcan, and all the time I was hurting you,"

Spock laid a fleeting arm across his shoulders. "No, Jim, not hurting. You did not ask me openly for anything a full Vulcan could not give. I did not mind. But I was...curious about the Human within me, and studied you and hoped to learn about myself. I understood your love for Edith, I pitied you, and wished I could help more than I did. It was the others I could not understand. I knew you did not always 'love' where you gave passion. This is a lack within me. Even my humanity cannot make me understand casual relationships. I have made love to two women, Jim, but neither time was it the full Vulcan that responded. I was not in control of either my mind or my body. When I am properly in control of myself, I can always block any physical sensations caused by attraction or

accidental physical proximity. I am totally Vulcan in my sexuality, and hard as I fought to understand yours, I could not. Do you understand?"

Kirk raised a rueful face. "You could hardly have picked a worse friend, then, could you, Spock? I'm sorry."

"You are as you are. I accept it now."

"But you still don't understand?" A tiny shake of the head. "Well, I don't know if I can explain, but I'll try. We Humans don't alwyas understand our own drives, Spock, but I'll be as honest as I can with you. Loneliness is something I know you can understand." Spock nodded. "Well, a casual affair, when both partners know it's casual and fleeting, can dispel loneliness temporarily. Even if you don't exchange love, you exchange a mutual trust and acceptance. It can be very comforting and meaningful. And, if I'm being honest, it isn't always even as pure a motive as that. I like women, Spock. I enjoy their company, and if they are willing, I like to make love. To forget for a brief moment that I am what I am, abandon responsibility, abandon the trappings and duties of command. It's a good way to relax, to forget."

"I understand it intellectually. What I could not understand was why it should affect me. And then I realised that I was envious, resentful...even jealous! You Terrans admit jealousy to be one of the seven deadly sins, to a Vulcan it is the deadliest of all, opening the way to hatred. Kaiidth! I was shamed to my very soul. You had done what I had thought in my pride could not be done, made me less Vulcan. Through the last months of our mission, I searched into myself deeper than I had ever done before. I knew there was a route; if I could achieve Kolinahr all my memories, my failures, you, my friend, would be patterned logic and there would be no more pain, no more pleasure, I would be... whole. I meditated deeply, and found the capability within me. I made the decision and thought I experienced peace. Even a Vulcan can deceive himself, Jim, and my Human half was merely hiding, biding his time until you called to me in your need." The even voice faltered, paused.

Kirk swallowed hard. "I have not understood you very well after all," he said eventually, when he thought his voice sufficiently under control. "But you did tell me, after V'ger, that you had not minded the sexual memories you had encountered in the meld."

The Vulcan looked away. "Nor the memories, Jim. In the meld one is, one has to be, completely honest. It is impossible to be otherwise, you know that. But at that time you had not broken my blocks, the meld was not total and there were omissions...gaps. When we spoke of it, I was not honest with you about my own nature and my lack of understanding of yours. I had blocked off that area of my mind, you had to find it in the meld. I knew what was there, I have always known, but dearly as I wanted to be completely open with you, then I could not."

"You mean...physically could not?"

Yes. The blocks stayed my speech, physically. I tried, but there was no way I could tell you of the...muddle...I had created within myself. But I wanted you to know; Jim, I was so sure our friendship could not be broken by anything."

"Not by anything," Kirk agreed steadily. "What of the future, Spock?"

"The future?"

"There will probably be other women in my life."

The eyebrow lifted. "I do not expect it to be otherwise. Maybe I shall come to understand the drives in time."

"I still haven't explained properly?"

"I believe you do not, as yet, understand what I need to learn. The reasons for casual sex are clear enough, it merely needs the application of reasoned thought to see what drives a man to seek out a woman. It is the physical act itself in Terrans I do not understand, simply because it is not so for us. Because my hearing is uncomfortably acute, I have sometimes unwittingly overheard couples.

When Humans begin to make love they are rational, we are not. Once we allow the process to begin, it is the meld that brings us together, and then it is unstoppable. We could hardly be more different in our approach, even though the outcome is...not dissimilar."

"Unstoppable?"

"Yes. Now you see why we must be able to block off our reactions, and why every so often we must undergo pon farr. It is our only form of release. If we are stopped for any reason, it triggers off the plak tow...and few Vulcans wish to experience that twice!"

Kirk took a long, long breath. "My friend, I don't envy you. But I begin to see why you disliked my own affairs. They must have seemed horribly superficial."

"Not at the time. However, I have now begun to see they have a real meaning, however fleeting. If I had thought them completely superficial I believe I would not have minded, and had I understood properly what they meant to you, I would not have been...unfeeling. But I thought you were as deeply involved as I would have been, and since it happened so often it lowered you in my eyes, diminished the respect I felt for you. Now I see how wrong I was. I'm sorry."

"We are very different after all," Kirk said wonderingly.

"I rejoice that we have differences, Jim."

"I'll try and explain what you need to know." Kirk grinned. "I'm sorry if I'm not very good at it, I've never had to explain the facts of life to anyone before."

The eyebrow flared. "I know the facts, Jim, it is the feelings I want to understand."

Kirk took another long breath. "It's physical mostly, to begin with. Pleasant physical sensations that are enjoyable and comforting and...close. But it can become like going over a waterfall in a canoe - suddenly you can't stop it!" He gave a rueful laugh. "Not like you, of course...if we're stopped it's just bloody uncomfortable, but there are similarities. It's just that we...let things get out of hand more by stealth than by intention. Up to a certain, very indeterminate point, you can kid yourself you can stop any time, but you don't. Am I making any kind of sense?"

Spock nodded. "It would seem that perhaps you are not so rational as it would outwardly appear."

"You could be right," Kirk grinned. "I wouldn't like to take an Academy test, for instance, under those conditions!"

There was silence again for a while until Kirk said reflectively, "Tomcat Kirk, the stud of the Galaxy."

Spock turned to look at him enquiringly. Kirk smiled a little shame-facedly. "We Human males are rather too inclined to be proud of our reputations with women, Spock. I suppose it's the way we are driven to reproduce our species, a way of ensuring that those of us who choose not to marry still make some contribution to the Human genetic pool. I've never minded my reputation, in fact I've traded on it many times, and I've never minded either when it's been undeserved. No-one ever believes you if you deny anything. Now you make me feel ashamed."

"It is illogical to be ashamed - however, Vulcans are not immune to that feeling, or we would not shroud our own drives in so much mystery!"

"Well." Kirk sat up abruptly. "There is no more mystery between us now, Spock. From now on we will be able to hide nothing from each other...but the first time I see any pretty and available female, I might wish it was possible to hide what I'm thinking!"

Still leaning back, relaxed and comfortable, Spock said, "I shall not intrude, Jim, and you will be taught to block me out, and if you are still fearful, I must

remind you that the next time I experience pon farr, I shall not be able to hide it from you."

"Have you...is there..." Kirk floundered a little. "I know T'Pring is no longer bonded to you, have you found someone else?"

"Not yet. However, next time I shall not wait so long, hoping I can control. I shall come home to Vulcan. It will not be a problem."

"And if I can't get you to Vulcan in time?" Kirk said roughly. "We could be at the other side of the Galaxy! I'll not have you die on me for such a thing as that. You must let me know in time to do something!"

"Let me help," Spock quoted softly. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, Jim."

"Uh-huh." Kirk looked at him affectionately, deeply proud that someone so special could put such trust in him. He held the look for a long moment.

Spock accepted the open affection with joy, and let his eyes study the face he loved. There was confidence and assurance in the hazel eyes, pleasure written in finely etched lines around the eyes, such appeal!

He, too, sat up abruptly.

Kirk grinned. "Something the matter?"

"I cannot read that look," Spock said flatly.

"What look?" The eyes were innocent.

"You are teasing me, but I do not know what about."

"I'm hungry!" Kirk said plaintively.

The final bonding was...grorious. There was no better word to express the sensations as they were instructed by T'Yana how to smooth each pathway, open every barrier at will, finding you could slip so easily, so comfortably into the mind of someone very dear. It was a soaring, an opening, a growing. It was a friend's touch, a mother's caress, a lover's arms. It was desiring, longing, satisfaction, completion. When it was over, it was still there, a part of you, never-endingly. Security.

They stood together before T'Yana, and Kirk was astounded to see the emotion in her expression.

"Thank you," he said simply.

"I, too, thank you," Spock said gravely.

"She's some lady," McCoy said soberly, "and I'd trust my mind with her any day."

"That's quite a compliment," Kirk told her.

She nodded. "I displayed emotion, James; but we have experienced family sharing, and although you call it by a different name, we both understand. Live long and prosper, Spock of Vulcan, James of Earth."

"Live long and prosper, T'Yana."

"Well now," McCoy said jovially. "We have two days before we hear the Council's findings. How are you going to fill the time in?"

Kirk looked at him enigmatically. "There are excellent recreational facilities here, Dr. McCoy. Perhaps a series of lectures on the quantum theory, or a refresher course on Vulcan endocrinology."

McCoy ignored him. "How about you, Spock?"

Spock passed a hand over his chin. "I suppose there wouldn't be time to get to Wrigley's Pleasure Planet in two days?"

"That's quite enough from both of you," McCoy said severely. "Since you don't have any better ideas, you can both take me around and show me the place. I took all the refresher courses I needed while you were staying with T'Yana. Very rewarding, but a little...concentrated!"

"I would be pleased to show you my world," Spock said. "I have often told you of its pleasures."

"If you could tell me how to keep cool in it, it would be more to the point," McCoy growled. "But since I'm here and can't get away, make the most of me while you've got me."

"You'd really like to look around?" Kirk said, pleased.

"I'd really like to look around," McCoy said patiently. "You don't have to believe all I've said in the past, you know."

"We know." They spoke simultaneously.

McCoy looked at them suspiciously. "Are you sure the link is broken again? I'm beginning to find you both a bit unnerving!"

Kirk began to laugh. McCoy jerked round to glare at Spock. "Oh, that's all right," he said with relief. "For one awful moment, I thought I was going to see a Vulcan get the giggles!"

Kirk controlled his laughter. - Spock. -

-Yes? -

- Joy, flooding. Is there anything you want to do? -

- Share the time with you and with our friend Dr. McCoy. -

- Good. We'll share your world with you until it's time to leave. -

- Pleasure. - The minds slipped apart again.

"That's settled then," Kirk said. "How about taking him to Vulcan's Forge,, Spock?"

"As long as you bring an ice-pack," McCoy agreed, "I'd like to see the place."

In spite of the inescapable physical discomfort, McCoy admitted the beauty of the planet.

"It's easy to see why gardens mean to much to you," he commented, his eyes on the deep reds and yellows of the desert. "I'll bet even the sight of a drop of green blood is welcome after all this." He sat down to ease his aching feet in the shade of a rock. "No, if you two want to kill yourselves wandering around in this heat, go ahead and do it. I'll wait here for you."

He watched the two friends leave. Darn it, the sun was making his eyes water again! He closed them. His mind wandered back over the strains of the last few days. Over now. Maybe he could stop worrying about those two at last - well - till the next time they did something damn stupid, anyway. He couldn't believe trouble wouldn't follow the pair of them as remorselessly as it had in the past. No, that was unfair. Trouble didn't follow them, they threw themselves headlong into it! But whatever they did, from now on they would do it together. There would be no more separations for them, even if they were physically parted. He wondered if Kirk had yet realised just how easily, and over what distances, he was going to be able to reach Spock's mind. If he'd been able to make Spock hear his urgent need over the light years between Earth and Vulcan before this... parted and yet never parted, over and always touching and touched.

Lucky devils!

- Spock! -

- Yes? -

- Sleep well. -

- You too, t'hy'la. -

In their separate rooms, two faces smiled in the darkness.

They sat with the Council once more, and T'Pau lifted her hand for silence.

"We have deliberated. Vulcans will not be forbidden to enter Starfleet. Your arguments were convincing, Captain Kirk, even without the practical demonstration of the peaceful uses of your power. Vulcan thanks you for that also." She lifted a lean finger, motioning Sarek forward to speak.

"Captain Kirk, Vulcan is honoured by your acceptance of our ideals and beliefs. The bonding you have achieved with Commander Spock demonstrates to us all that Human and Vulcan may live to understand each other. Please, step forward."

Puzzled, Kirk rose and went to him. A chain was placed over his head.

"You reminded us of our IDIC," T'Pau said. "Please wear it as a mark of our respect and gratitude."

"Vulcan honours me greatly. I thank you." He gave the Vulcan salute and stepped back to his chair, taken aback by his inward emotional response but covering it well. He was still in a daze when the session was over, but recovered himself enough to receive the formal congratulations and thanks of the assembled Vulcans. He was not helped by McCoy's muttered comment to Spock.

"Why don't they just sing 'For he's a jolly good fellow' and then we could all go home?"

Last in the line was T'Pau herself. He straightened his shoulders just a little bit more. She looked from him to McCoy.

"You are welcome on Vulcan, Captain, Doctor." They bowed. "It would seem you have many ways to cheat death, you Humans. Live long and prosper."

She swept regally out.

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Typically, there was scant time to draw breath on rejoining the Enterprise, with flurried and vague orders coming in from Starfleet, sending them out to a planet on the Rim, newly contacted by the Federation.

"As fast a passage as possible," the orders said, and that meant everyone enduring a good deal of tight-lipped, short temper from Chief Engineer Scott while the massive powers of the newly overhauled warp engines maintained dangerously high speeds for a protracted period.

"Why all the gosh-darned hurry?" McCoy growled bad-temperedly over coffee in the rec room. "Does Starfleet never take the effect on my nerves into account?"

"I shouldn't think so," Kirk said hard-heartedly.

"Well, why <u>are</u> we in such a hurry? Did someone leave his library book behind there?"

Kirk suppressed a smile. "I don't know why we're taking you along, Bones. Starfleet wants someone capable of tact and diplomacy on this trip! Apparently Penthyrica has a lot to offer in the way of music and the visual arts...and dilithium. But their social structure is complicated and Starfleet are not sure that their preliminary surveys have all the answers. So it's 'softlee, softlee, catchee monkey'. I am to offer 'any reasonable concessions' and to make myself responsible for arranging mining rights."

"That's what you get for doing a desk job for three years. I told you all along it was a mistake." McCoy grinned.

"Nothing is worse than a friend who says, 'I told you so'." Kirk got up. "I know I've given you enough opportunity recently but I'd be grateful if you'd lay off."

"Point taken." McCoy got up and went out with him. "Where's Spock this evening?"

"We're going to have a game of chess later. Right this minute, he's in the lower records section."

"How do you know...?" McCoy broke off. "I'll get used to it, Jim - one day."

"Before I do, I expect. We've got a lot of work to put in before I shall be really used to this. For one thing I've got to learn to shield my own mind... for his sake." He winked. "I think a lot of things a respectable Vulcan doesn't want to get mixed up with."

McCoy laughed. "Why play chess with him yet, though? It isn't going to be much of a game if he knows every thought."

"Spock thinks my competitive nature will help me to learn to block more quickly...or in other words," his grin widened, "I'm a bad loser!"

He watched McCoy go off laughing, and went into his quarters to set the chess board ready. He'd always had an old-fashioned preference for the reality of the tri-dimensional board over the diagrammatic representation of the computer terminal. He enjoyed handling the pieces. It was a double pleasure to prepare them now; until Spock's return to the Enterprise, he had not played chess since the end of their first five-year mission. How long ago that seemed now, and how unimportant the hurts. No matter what distances separated them in the future, they would always be in contact, part of each other's thoughts. He sat down and concentrated.

- Spock? -

- I have almost completed my duties here, Jim. -

- Where are you? -

- In the chem lab. -

- Good, I'm getting better. I got through to you straight away. -

- You make me sound like an intercom outlet. - Teasing.

Kirk allowed his laughter to be heard and then concentrated hard on re-erecting the shield he had set up earlier with Spock's help. This wasn't going to be easy, but it was great fun practising the required techniques. For Spock's sake he had to learn them as quickly as possible; he'd already received a few quizzical looks from him over some of the more unguarded things he'd let slip. Only this morning after beaming back aboard, when he'd caught sight of that up-ended Ensign collecting the scattered tapes for instance. He gave a sigh, regretting the days of the short-skirted uniform so many of the women had hated, with justification too if his own thoughts had often been anything to go by.

- Sometimes, Jim, I wonder how Human males ever manage to get any work done at all. -

- Eavesdropper! - Kirk was laughing. - I was trying to shield them. -

- If you want to have any chance of winning another chess game you will have to do better than that. -

- Kladistidth! -

This time it was Spock's shields that went up in mock outrage at the earthy Klingon insult. Kirk tried again, closing his eyes the better to concentrate, turning his perception inwards and visualising a physical, metal screen rolling down over his mind. For the moment it was easier to work with symbols; in time

the response would be automatic, like drawing your hand away from a flame.

Spock arrived a few seconds later and they settled down to a companionable game. Kirk made his first few moves in complete silence, concentrating on maintaining his shields, barely looking up at all. Spock watched him, allowing a tiny smile to touch his eyes. It was always pleasing to watch Kirk, and since he had taken to studying his expressive face closely it was surprising how easy it was to gauge his mood. He was maintaining the shield well tonight, surprisingly well...no, not surprising; when had he ever known Kirk to fail at something he was determined on? Still, it was time he provided a little extra testing now that his blocks were well in place. Distraction was the first requirement and he had an excellent idea to employ. If a Vulcan could ever be said to be smiling evilly, Spock was doing it now.

"Ensign Pritchard is considered to be an attractive Human female, is she not, Jim?"

"Huh?" Kirk recalled that trim shape with pleasure. "You could say that, yes. Why do you ask?"

Spock moved his queen. "Simple curiosity. I am endeavouring to see precisely what it is that attracts you to certain women and not to others."

"Come off it." Kirk eyed him knowingly. "I've seen you not exactly indifferent to some women. What attracts you?" He made his move.

"The quality of their minds," Spock said blandly and untruthfully, sending out a tentative tendril of thought. "What else should attract one person to another?"

"Genetic compatibility," Kirk said equally blandly. "There is no other logical criterion, surely?"

"But if two females possess equal genetic compatibility - " Spock moved his bishop, aware now of Kirk's intentions, " - what do you do?"

"Take 'em both!" Kirk broke up at the pained look he received, and laughed until he cried. "Well, you did ask!" He brushed a hand over the moisture on his lids, stared at the upper level of the chess board and then over at Spock. "You read my mind," he said accusingly.

"Quite openly," Spock assured him. "Checkmate in three moves, I believe."

Kirk groaned. "I call that taking an unfair advantage, setting me off thinking about Ensign Pritchard." He deliberately let his memory linger over her and felt Spock withdraw abruptly. "I'm sorry." Kirk was instantly repentent. "That was an unfair thing to do to you."

"You do find her attractive, do you not?" Spock was frowning a little.

"Something is bothering you," Kirk said softly. "Look, even if she was someone I could take an interest in I wouldn't while I still can't block you out properly. It wouldn't be fair either to you or the girl." There was a moment's pause and then Spock looked up, but his mind was still well-shielded. "Spock, you're hiding something from me, please don't. We're bonded because we belong together, we shouldn't hide things from each other. Tell me what it is. Let me share."

"Sometimes you are too perceptive, Jim." Spock was not quite comfortable. "I am a little bothered about the Order concerning non-fraternisation between ranks."

"If you're bothered, what do you think I am?" Kirk grinned. "No, you mean it, don't you? Spock, don't you know I never tangle with crew? Nor do any of my senior officers. I suppose I've never had occasion to drop a quiet word in your ear on the subject, otherwise you'd have known that that General Order is kept strictly on board the Enterprise. Anything else is simply not fair."

Spock frowned. "But you can allow yourself to think of Ensign Pritchard."

"There are no Thought Police on board Federation ships," Kirk laughed. "It's quite natural to look and to wonder. One doesn't have to let it go any further. Now on shore leave..." He paused suggestively. "That's a whole new ball game."

"I see." Spock looked directly across at him. "You have given me much to think about, Jim. It seems that Humans are not quite so much at the mercy of their emotions as I had previously thought."

"We do have controls and blocks," Kirk agreed. "Social taboos and inhibitions. We don't approach the problem logically like you Vulcans, but we are aware that unconfined license leads to chaos."

Spock opened his mouth to reply, to be interrupted by the insistent buzz of the intercom. Kirk leaned over to it. "Kirk here."

"Accident in Sickbay, sir," Uhura said. "Dr. McCoy has been injured. Your presence is requested."

Kirk felt the abrupt upsurge of concern from Spock's mind combine with and enhance his own jolt of fear, but had no time to assimilate the experience. "I'm on my way. Kirk out."

He shot the briefest of reassuring looks at Spock as they half ran to the lift. Once inside he started them on their way and looked over at his friend. Spock appeared as cool and as unruffled as ever, but those surging waves of worry were still there, incompletely blocked.

"Strong emotion is hard to control, isn't it?" he asked tentatively, wondering how he was going to be able to prevent Spock from picking up more than either of them would like next time he was on shore leave.

One flaring eyebrow lifted in mild surprise. "I was not really trying to shield my mind, Jim. You said yourself earlier on this evening that we bonded because we belong. There is no reason why you should not learn of my very strong affection for Dr. McCoy."

Kirk shook his head, smiling. "You are a fraud, Spock. Just a sentimentalist at heart."

Christine Chapel met them at the door into Sickbay. "He's all right," she said thankfully.

"What happened? I thought he'd gone to bed?"

"One of the crew had a minor accident in the gym and the bone-setting laser Dr. McCoy was using was faulty. We were afraid at first that it had permanently damaged his hand. That's why I sent for you...we thought it would be better if you were here when we broke it to him, but he's been lucky. It missed the tendons completely."

"You look quite pale, Doctor. It must have been a nasty moment," Kirk said sympathetically. "Can we go in and see him?"

"Yes. Go right ahead. Dr. M'Benga's finished patching him up."

They walked into Sickbay to find a disgruntled McCoy lying back with a heavily bandaged hand. "When I find out who tested that instrument I'll have him demoted to tea-boy," he growled.

"I'm glad it wasn't serious," Kirk said softly. "You were lucky, Bones."

"Dam' lucky," McCoy agreed. "Hi, Spock. Come to gloat?"

"Gloat?" Spock sounded shocked. "Your accident was not due to your own carelessness, surely?"

McCoy came bolt upright. "I'll have you know I'm never careless, you Vulcan machine, you."

- You see. He is brighter already, Jim. -

Kirk could not keep from laughing at the teasing mind-voice, so at variance

with the outward formality. McCoy looked from one to the other.

"Is this a private joke or can anyone join?"

Kirk shook his head, laughing. "You certainly perked up a lot then," he teased.

"Well, he gets under my skin," McCoy complained, lying back down again.

"To a very precise depth," Kirk agreed happily. "Think you'll live through the night?"

"I guess so." McCoy closed his eyes and listened to his friends' footsteps as they went to the door. He opened one eye again, watching them both affectionately. Just as the door opened ahead of Kirk he said suddenly, "Who won the chess?"

Kirk looked over his shoulder. "He did. Took a most unfair advantage of me."

McCoy shut his eyes again. "More power to your elbow, Spock," he said sleepily as the doors swished shut.

They spent a good deal of the hourney to the Rim in practising the new skills both of them had to learn to apply to make the bond workable. Kirk found himself intensely grateful that he was no natural telepath. It was one thing to share your thoughts with someone you trusted as deeply as he trusted Spock, but the idea of trying to cope with the outpourings of many minds was quite horrifying. Small wonder Miranda Jones had spent so many years on Vulcan perfecting the mental techniques that had kept her sane. Small wonder also that the touch-telepathic Vulcans avoided physical contact whenever possible. It was only now they had grown so close that he could appreciate the tolerance Spock had shown him over the years, and he could see why his innate sensuality had driven Spock away, unable to understand or come to terms with a nature so different from his own. And yet in spite of that tremendous difference Spock had returned to him, ready to risk everything he had achieved in his desperate search for an answer. They needed each other, there was no denying or ignoring it, and now that the bond was made it was an ever-present joy, a constant relief from loneliness.

Oddly enough, as the days went by, they made less direct contact rather than more. It was as if the knowledge that they were no longer alone was sufficient. It became easier hour by hour for Kirk to shield also, cumulating in the day that he trapped a finger painfully in a desk drawer and held up the abused appendage triumphantly late that evening in the privacy of his quarters.

"And you never felt a thing," he crowed.

"Indeed not." Spock inspected the injury. "That must have been quite painful. Are you sure it is not broken?"

"Mother hen." Kirk waggled the finger scathingly. "Of course it isn't."

"No, I believe it is not," Spock conceded. "Well done, Jim. The process has become automatic now, and provided you do not start to be careless you should have no more trouble."

"You mean you shouldn't. Don't think I don't appreciate how tough it's been for you over the last few weeks. You must be glad to be free of me."

- NEVER say that. - The words came explosively through the bond. Kirk looked up in surprise. Spock's eyes slid away from his. "I apologise," he said stiffly.

- Hey, it's me, remember? -

- How could I forget? You have always drawn an unexpected response from me. -

- I'm not sorry. I can't be. This all means so much. -

Their minds slid apart again. So much could be said within the bond that

would never be spoken aloud, Kirk thought. It meant a lot to him to be able to express what he really felt to Spock and know that he was understood. He set up the chess board.

"Tonight a really fair game," he said firmly.

Spock hid his smile and helped set up the pieces. "You may well still lose!"

But he didn't.

The passage to Penthyrica was completed without further incident worthy of note and the Enterprise slid into orbit to make radio contact with the authorities who seemed to be awaiting them with impatience.

"We were given to understand that your Federation ships were capable of great speeds," the Basilea said loftily.

"And we have used these speeds to the full in our journey here," Kirk replied politely, adding privately to Spock, - Wow, get an eyeful of that! -

She was very beautiful, and scantily clad, and... Kirk closed his thoughts down hurriedly with a brief apology directed at Spock. His bond-brother could only wonder yet again at the Human capacity to function on two levels simultaneously and eyed his Captain with a new respect.

The rest of the bridge crew, male section, were frankly goggling, and the female contingent were taking careful note of every expert wiggle and pout.

Never under-estimate the opposition was one of the soundest maxims Kirk had ever employed, and he was not about to underestimate this woman simply because of her distinctly sexpot appearance. He exchanged courtesies blandly, extended the goodwill of the Federation, and enquired how soon he and his team could beam down.

"Team? Oh no," she said huskily. "We cannot accept a team. We only deal with the highest among you. You will beam down alone, Captain Kirk. We will receive you in an hour."

She made a lazy movement with one finger and the screen went dark.

"Well, that's one way to avoid argument," Kirk reflected. "Observations, gentlemen? And if anyone says 'Lucky you', I'll put him out of an airlock in his underwear."

Sulu and Chekov exchanged expressive grins.

"Well, I don't like it." Predictably, that was McCoy. "Remember Gideon, Jim."

"The situations are not precisely parallel," Kirk began.

"No, you'd be right off guard with her around," McCoy said pointedly. "I don't intend any disrespect, Captain. I guess even the monks of Labish IV would start dropping their beads if she walked in."

"The information we have on Penthyrica is slight," Spock said. "The original survey team complained that social mores were unpredictable and easily offended against. One man alone runs less risk of offending."

"We don't have an option there," Kirk reminded them. "Either I go alone or not at all. That's not the point at issue. I go, and I go alone. What I want are any...observations anyone has to make, any tiny point the rest of us may have missed."

"She wasn't alone," Uhura said slowly. "There was someone else in the room with her."

Kirk swung his chair to look at her. "How do you know?"

"She kept smiling at him."

"How do you know it was a man?"

Uhura's eyes held a distinct twinkle. "Well, I sure don't smile at another woman quite like that!"

Kirk drummed a finger on the arm of his chair. "I...uh...must admit I thought she was smiling at me," he said casually.

However, Uhura was certain enough for them to replay the Basilea's invitation. Once you were looking for it, it was obvious Uhura was right. There had been someone else there, out of vision, and that someone had been at the receiving end of several delectably inviting glances.

"Interesting," Kirk nodded, "but it could mean nothing at all. Could just be the boyfriend."

"Or her husband," Spock said drily.

- Spoil-sport! - Kirk got to his feet. "Well, I'll let you all know when I get back. Sulu, you have the con."

Spock accompanied him into the turbolift. Once the doors were closed, he observed dispassionately, "I can of course monitor you, Jim. I am confident our bond is strong enough for ship to shore contact by now, but I must admit I am not entirely sanguine as to your safety."

Kirk lifted an eyebrow at him. "A hunch, Spock? That's not like you."

"No." Spock admitted it freely. "I can see no logical cause for concern, but I would ask you to be on your guard."

"This is why we've bonded after all," Kirk said softly. "To help prevent occasions like this from getting to us. Possibly we didn't expect to have to test it quite so soon, but..." He shrugged expressively.

"You have the easier role," Spock said abruptly.

Kirk eyed him with compassion. "I know. Waiting is never easy."

Kirk waved back to yet another waving group and slid his hand arrestingly over his companion's wandering one. Close to, the blonde and busty Basilea was more alluring, more over-poweringly feminine than ever, and this time the come-hitherish look in her eye was undoubtedly for him. It gave him a distinct sense of unease - that prickle at the nape of his neck that sounded its enigmatic warning of danger. But even if the alarm-bells were not beginning to sound in his head, he could hardly get that friendly in an open carriage in full view of the local inhabitants. He gripped her hand firmly, stilling its errant path, and looked around him with interest.

The architecture was stunningly beautiful - both in its symmetry and its deep green stonework. Every wall was richly carved with abstract designs that led the eye on and up to the impossibly high, unthinkably slender towers. He'd never seen a city that looked so...organic, more like a growing crystal than a created collection of dwellings.

- You'd like this place, Spock. It's unbelievably lovely. Like a jewel. -

- Indeed? And the inhabitants? -

- Beautiful too. - Teasing. - You've seen one, multiply her by a thousand, that'll give you some idea! -

He turned his head to see the enticing mauve eyes with their smoky grey lashes gazing deeply into his own. He exerted every bit of control he had, smiled back charmingly and said, - Spock, I'm raising my shields. Don't contact me unless it's really urgent, and no, it isn't what you're thinking. -

- I never indulge in commonplace thoughts, - Spock said loftily, and caught the silver ripple of laughter as Kirk firmly shut him out.

His Captain meanwhile was alighting from the carriage and holding up a

courteous hand to assist the Basilea to alight. Attendants bowed on all sides, clear-toned music broke out in greeting and they walked up the shallow steps to the exquisitely decorated doorway of the most ornate building he had yet seen. Inside it was just as breath-taking; comparable to any wonder of the known Galaxy, holding its own against the Palace of Enchantment of Alpha Canis Minoris IV, and Alcazar of Eta Ophiuchi III or the Chateau of the Oligarch on Epsilon Argus VIII.

By the time he'd been led to one of a pair of softly covered couches and been tempted with refreshment, wine, fruit, sweetmeats of all kinds, by a line of butterfly-dressed women who would have made any houri look like a man, Kirk felt his head beginning to reel and wondered if old age was creeping up on him faster than he'd feared. He pulled his failing senses together and began to discuss diplomatic affairs, mineral rights, cultural exchanges, one part of his mind working with practised efficiency while the other part acted like a small boy let loose in a sweet shop. To his relief the Basilea seemed prepared to be completely co-operative, discussing reciprocal agreements and official treaties with interest and intelligence, but the seductive movements and fluttering eye-lashes never abandoned their enticing appeals for his attention throughout the most serious discussions, and the prickle at the back of his neck was piercing more sharply all the time.

"I am sure we shall be able to come to the most satisfactory agreements," she cooed at last, rising from her langourous pose and beckoning to the women, "but now I should like you to meet some more of my people."

Kirk had a polite word and a charming smile for them all. Even the males on this planet were superlatives. Bigger, broader, huskier, devastatingly good-looking...they reminded Kirk vividly of the superb physical specimens that had guarded Elaan. One in particular was greeted with great affection by the Basilea and made to sit beside her while she fawned upon him as she had earlier done upon Kirk and at the same time continued her business-like and efficient introductions of her exclusively female ministers.

He had time to talk to many of them, and found them all to be equally as easy to talk to, as knowledgeable and as professional as their leader...and equally sexy. He was almost glad that he had to hold his baser instincts on a tight rein for Spock's sake, or he might have drowned in such a foaming sea of feminine pulchritude. As it was he brushed through the evening with reasonable aplomb and was able to make reassuring and unreserved contact with Spock once he was alone in the luxury and comfort of the sleeping apartment assigned to him.

- You could sleep the whole of the Science Section in here with room to spare, - he told Spock as he splashed lazily in the small pool at one end of the room.

- Indeed. Would it be desirable to do so? -

- I wouldn't mind having you here to hold my hand, - he teased. - This place gets to you like nothing I've ever seen before."-

He was tempted to lock his door, his uneasiness persisting, but he laughed himself out of the idea, climbed into the bed that more nearly resembled a cushioned tennis court, and composed himself for sleep.

He'd had the ability to sleep almost at will since midshipman days, and always slept lightly, waking at any unexpected sound. He came awake sharply, aware of movement and looked round the softly moonlit room with wary eyes. He gave a soundless sigh of resignation. Why had he had that uncomfortable feeling that the women weren't going to leave him alone? He waited until she came close and then grabbed at her, holding one hand over her mouth to stop her screams. He could see little of her face in the dimness, so he dragged her over to the table where a lamp was set, and lighted it.

Typically, she was beautiful, dark-haired, yellow-eyed, petite and delicate.

"Well?" He used his command voice and eye.

She rubbed her abused arms and said plaintively, "It is not well done to

treat the Basilea so cavalierly."

"I wasn't aware I had," Kirk said cynically. "Surely everyone here knows I have met the Basilea and am therefore well acquainted with the way she looks. She is blonde, you are dark; she is tall, you are short; she is...uh...full-figured, you are tiny...do I need to go on?"

"But I am the Basilea," she protested, "and I have come to keep you company tonight if you wish it." She hipped a couple of steps closer.

He took a hasty step backwards. "Oh no you don't," he said firmly. "I have no need of company tonight or any other night, and you will get out of my room and go try your tricks on someone else. They won't work with me. You're a very pretty girl, but you're just not my type. Now run along, there's a dear."

As she showed no sign of going, merely stood there pouting sultrily, he took her hand to lead her to the door and immediately found his arms full of sweet-smelling woman. It was tempting, certainly it was tempting, and he was grinning to himself as he picked her up. By the expression on her face she clearly thought she'd won and she peered at him under her lashes as he carried her across the room. He deposited her beside the door, opened it, firmly lifted her out through it and said, "Goodnight. Sleep well," most politely, shut the door carefully, locked it this time and went back to bed.

He woke next morning with a clear head and a most pleasant feeling of self-righteousness. Smug was possibly the only applicable word, Spock told him as he bathed and dressed and chatted companionably to his bond-brother.

- I wonder why she made such an obviously disprovable claim? - Spock said.

- Perhaps she fancied me. - Kirk tried not to laugh.

- Perhaps. - Spock replied seriously.

- Go flannel someone else. - Kirk laughed. - I'm going to face the blonde bombshell again. -

But he wasn't. This morning the Basilea was small, dark, petite and unquestionably his night-time visitor.

He stared round wildly. She was wearing the Basilea's unmistakable head-dress, she was sitting - or rather, lounging - on the Basilea's couch in front of a low table piled high with food, the women were bowing and acting just as they had done last night, only to the wrong woman. He blinked at her uncomprehendingly and sat on his couch with something of a thump while he tried to work it out. The tiny, dark-haired woman greeted him with warmth, no obvious animosity, an apology for beginning to discuss business so early in the day, and a request for clarification of a point he had been discussing the day before with the blonde woman.

He shot another swift look round the room. Everyone was acting as though nothing untoward had occurred, so he gave a mental shrug and went along with it without argument. This woman had obviously been very well briefed by her... predecessor?...and spoke of every matter with knowledgeable ease.

His second shock of the morning arrived with a bowl of warm, perfumed water for washing his hands and a soft towel for drying them. Blonde, busty, mauve eyes with smoky-grey lashes... He greeted her warmly. The extraordinary eyes lifted to his without a sign of recognition.

- She looked totally blank, - he explained to Spock at the first opportunity he had for conversation. - The dark-haired one behaved in every way as though it was she I'd talked to yesterday, and the blonde female looked straight through me. -

- The original contact team reported the inhabitants to be unpredictable over whether they knew you or not, - Spock said. - Their report does not suggest any such occurrence as you have observed, however. Have you noticed anything else strange? -

- All the officials are women, but yet it doesn't seem like a matriarchy, - Kirk told him. - The males are...very, very male, I can't put it better than that, and the women flutter round them like moths round a light. Mind you, they do that to me, too. -

- I have observed that phenomenon before, - Spock told him dispassionately.

- I'm being terribly good, - Kirk said demurely.

- I have also observed that phenomenon! - Spock sounded faintly surprised.

Kirk ignored the innuendo. - I've got to go, there's a harem of attendants waiting to take me for a drive around the countryside. -

He broke the contact, smiling, and went out to the waiting carriage.

This Basilea's hands were fully as wandering as her blonde sister's had been, and he occupied himself between enjoying the scenery and fending off her almost blatant advances. It was disconcerting to say the least,for she continued to discuss political matters with him as though her mind and her body worked on two different levels.

Even if I tried to kiss her she'd still be spouting facts and figures at me, he thought dazedly as he attempted to keep his mind on his assigned work and her hands off him. He distracted her by asking about the people they saw working in the fields, brown clad, rather dull looking compared to the people he'd seen up to now, and he suspected, very much smaller in size.

"They are workers," she told him.

"Workers? Some class distinction?"

"Yes. We have them at the Basilica. I will show you."

A sudden suspicion struck him. "Are they slaves?"

"Slaves?" She did not understand the concept. "No, we do not own them," she said, laughing, when he'd explained. "They do what they are born to do."

Genetic manipulation? That sounded even worse. He passed the information on to Spock and kept his mind open to the Vulcan when he went to see the workers of the Basilica on his return there.

They were even drabber close up than they had seemed from a distance, dull brown hair, eyes and skin; mouths shut like little traps, close-pressed. They kept busily on with the household tasks in the lower regions and none of them would speak in reply to any of his questions.

The Basilea laughed merrily at him. "Workers do not speak, they listen and they work," she told him.

He eyed the people closely, not sure even which were male and which female, or whether they were all the same sex. There was only one way to find out.

She laughed again at his question. "They are workers. Not male or female."

"Not male or...you mean neuters?" He'd met other races where this was the case, but it was a surprise all the same. At a rough estimate the workers outnumbered the rest by five to one. How on earth did they maintain their population levels?

He discussed the new discovery with Spock while he bathed and prepared for the evening meal.

- Interesting, - Spock commented.

- Are you beginning to have some ideas? -

- One. A rather remote possibility, however. I would like to do some further checking before I make any suggestion to you. It will not do to mislead you in any way. -

- Fair enough. - Kirk wrapped a massive towel round himself. - You know, I

could get to like this life. -

- If what I suspect is true, I doubt it. - Spock said drily, but refused to elaborate further.

Kirk accompanied the Basilea to the dinner table, full of good intentions and thoroughly in control. He neither ate too much, drank too much, nor allowed his companion to distract him too much. Indeed, since they were on the verge of a most satisfactory settlement, this was not the time to relax his guard. He accepted a second glass of wine and politely drank to the Basilea. She fluttered a practised eyelash at him and drank her own glass off in one gulp. Politely, he followed her example.

The room began to away, mist, dissolve and he fell back on to the cushioned couch,as darkness thundered over him.

"What do you mean, you've lost contact?" McCoy hissed in a piercing stage whisper.

Spock straightened up, abandoning the sensors and indicated the turbo-lift with a tiny jerk of his head. It made an excellent spot for discussions that should not be overheard by the rest of the bridge crew.

"I'm sorry," McCoy apologised. "They'll all find out sooner or later, you know."

"We both wish to grow a little more accustomed to it ourselves before we make any announcement," Spock said calmly. "We are well aware of the illogicality of concealment."

"Stop changing the subject. What do you mean, you've lost contact?"

"Jim is unconscious. I cannot reach his mind while he is in that condition. If he was merely asleep I could wake him, but this is not normal sleep, it is artificially induced."

"Then you should beam down with a security team..."

"Doctor, kindly do not be so impetuous. He has only been in this condition for six minutes. You are as well aware as I am that the rules governing initial contacts..."

"Don't quote rules at me!" McCoy roared unfairly. "This is Jim we're talking about, not some statistic on a page. Dammit, man, you're bonded to him, I'm not. Don't tell me he means more to me than he does to you!"

Spock stared at him rigidly, controlling his very real anger. "Emotionalism will answer nothing," he said coldly and turned to go.

McCoy grabbed his arm and swung him back. "Spock, don't be so darn pig-headed," he growled. "There must be something we can do."

"Doctor, you are over-reacting. If it were not for the fact that the Captain and I are bonded we would know nothing of this for another eight hours. It is planet night at present and we would have had a standard report an hour ago, as Lt. Commander Uhura did, and then nothing until planet dawn."

"But this time we know there's something wrong," McCoy fretted. "I can't work on the way I would feel if I didn't know!"

Spock raised his cool brown eyes to the fiery blue ones. "I am concerned also," he said quietly, "but I am also certain Jim would not wish us to rush in at the first indication that all was not quite straight-forward. I give you my word that as soon as I feel it is logically right to do so, I will interfere without hesitation."

And McCoy had to be content with that for the moment. He did his very best not to let his increasing worry show as the moments ticked by, forcing himself to take a catnap on the emergency couch in his office, resolutely keeping his finger off the intercom button and his presence off the bridge, but when he woke

from his short, unrefreshing sleep, he had to go and see what was happening.

The Vulcan was bent over the sensors as if he had grown there, monitoring the one Human reading in the mass of Penthyricans. McCoy touched his shoulder gently and he straightened wearily, shaking his head. This time it was McCoy who indicated the turbolift.

"You look terrible," he said roughly. "Still no news?"

"He is still unconscious." Spock stretched slightly, moving muscles that had been frozen with his unblinking stare at the readouts. He controlled an urge to shudder.

McCoy saw the tension in the too-thin body. "Spock, this is being a hell of a strain on you," he said softly. "Can't you do anything yet?"

Spock took a deep breath. "Another half hour, Doctor, and the statutory time will have elapsed. After that I can make all the fuss you would make yourself - if I wish to."

He had anticipated the mild joke would relieve McCoy's tension, but the doctor continued to eye him worriedly. "What is wrong, Doctor?"

"What happens to you if anything happens to Jim?" McCoy asked abruptly.

Appreciating that the question was born of real concern, Spock answered it truthfully. "I will not want to live. I will be able to function long enough to get the Enterprise to safety should there be any danger, maybe even for so long as a year, after that..." He shrugged.

"And Jim, what does he do if anything happens to you?" The pit of McCoy's stomach was full of frozen lead.

"He is a non-telepath, the effect on him will not be so drastic. There will be...a deep sense of loss."

McCoy stared at him long and hard. "Then you'd better not hang about once that half hour's up, had you? Because I can't stand to lose both of you a second time!"

Whatever it was Kirk might have expected to wake up to, it was not to his own massive bedroom positively awash with females.

He lay back dizzily listening to the murmur of feminine voices, feeling gentle hands soothing his brow, opened a tentative eye and blanched. There must be thirty or forty of the women in here, only the Basilea appeared to be missing.

Uh...oh! There was the unmistakable headdress crowning another blonde, brown-eyed this time. He closed his eyes in disbelief.

She cooed over him, putting a gentle arm under his shoulders and holding something cold to his lips. Water! He sat up, took the cup, drank thirstily and looked her straight in the eye.

"And I suppose you've come to keep me company too?"

"If I do not please you, there are others to select." She waved a delicate hand.

He gritted his teeth. "You all seem very determined." There was one good way to find out what this persistently seductive behaviour indicated at least. He took a deep breath, sent out an apologetic call to his bond-brother, and kissed her passionately.

Aboard the Enterprise, Spock shot to his feet in amazement.

Before the kiss was over, the other women were pulling at Kirk, hauling him to his feet. Resigned, somehow unsurprised, it was all part of the now-you-see-me-now-you-don't planet that you could get open invitation instantly followed by blunt rejection, Kirk followed their insistently tugging hands along the passages, down stairways, into the depths of the Basilica.

Before Spock could reply to McCoy's urgent questioning Uhura looked up from her console. "Mr. Spock, they're requesting your presence down on the planet."

"Very well, Lt. Commander. Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

McCoy followed him into the turbolift. "What happened?"

"I made contact with a telepathic mind," Spock said succinctly. "My theory concerning this society may be about to be proved correct, though I am by no means sure as yet. The contact was very brief."

"Is Jim all right?"

"I believe so, yes. He is certainly conscious again." Spock concentrated briefly. "Yes, physically he says he is well, but he seems to be being taken prisoner."

"Do you know where?"

Spock paused as the door opened. "I shall be able to find him, Doctor, do not worry." He walked briskly into the transporter room and went to the console. "You have the co-ordinates, Mr. Kyle?"

"Yes. Sir, they're not the same as those the Captain beamed down to. They seem to be deep inside some building."

Spock studied the readings and nodded. "That will take me very close to the Captain, Doctor. Does that satisfy you?"

"No," McCoy said shortly. "But don't let that worry you!"

Spock materialised in a rocky chamber several metres underground, lit by smoking lamps that smelled sweetly, leaving a cloying, sticky sensation in the air that clung to his skin, gumming his eyelids and drying his lips. He ignored the brown-clad people moving slowly about and ran the few paces to where Kirk was being released by a group of women, breathing a silent sigh of relief that he seemed unharmed.

- Are you all right, Jim? -

- Spock! How did you get here? -

- I was invited to come. -

"Invited?" Kirk said aloud. "By whom?"

"By me." The voice was richly musical. "Do come closer, both of you."

"Where are you?" Kirk looked around him. At the far end of the chanber was a raised platform covered in complex piping and machinery, ceaselessly tended by the workers.

"Yes, you have seen me," the rich voice chuckled. "Come closer."

Kirk shot a look compounded of curiosity and bewilderment at Spock and led the way down the room. - Does this tie in with your ideas? -

- Affirmative. I believe this may be a hive culture. -

- A hive? - It would explain many things, certainly, particularly the neuter workers and possibly the attitude of the females to the males. He paused at the foot of the steps to the platform.

"Come up, come up. No need to be shy. We have met before, Captain - or at least, we have talked together."

Kirk went up the steps, closely followed by his watchful bond-brother, stopped short and gaped in blank amazement.

Housed in the twisting pipes, constantly bathed by an opaque, sweet-smelling liquid, was the most enormous female he had ever seen, her body swollen beyond credibility. Her arms, two massive balloons of flesh, and her still-lovely head,

were the only parts of her completely visible and he was thankful the rest of her was modestly hidden from view beneath the veiling fluid.

She gave a deep, full-throated chuckle. "Not so much of a beauty, am I?"

Kirk's irrepressible and charming smile lit his eyes. "Your face is a delight to behold."

She laughed again. "You have a honeyed tongue, Captain."

"I speak the truth," he assured her. "I presume you are the 'real' Basilea?"

"The others were equally 'real', Captain. They spoke with my voice."

"You are telepathic?" - Spock, did you know? -

- Not until you were in close physical contact with one of the young ladies, - Spock told him discreetly.

"Yes, but only within my own city, or with another queen. It was purely by chance that I discovered your link to your First Officer. Mr. Spock, is it not?" She eyed him with interest. "You are not of the same race as the Captain?"

"No. I am a Vulcan."

"And yet you are bonded?" She looked from one to the other. "You must be two very exceptional people to place such trust in each other."

Kirk gave his bond-brother the tiniest of smiles then asked bluntly, "But why the charade, all the nubile women? Why not see me yourself straight away?"

She gave vent to another enormous chuckle. "Now don't tell me you'd rather see me."

"Much rather," he said honestly.

She looked surprised. "I believe you mean it."

"Of course I mean it." He stepped closer to the tank and smiled down at her. "You and I have a lot in common."

A look of strong disbelief crossed her face. "I don't take kindly to flattery..."

He shook his head. "It's no flattery. We're both leaders, we both control complex social groups.. You are in control of this city, aren't you?"

"Very astute of you," she said admiringly. "Yes, my sister queens and I control the cities of Penthyrica and I am the leader of all, the Basilea."

"Then we have plenty in common," Kirk assured her. "And I have already discovered what a pleasure it is to do business with you. But you still haven't answered my question. Why not have me brought to you at once?"

She studied him for a moment out of narrowed eyes and then said, "We were pleased when the first scout ship from the Federation made contact with us. Our technology has progressed as far as it will go within the limitations of our society. We are eager for expansion and hoped that the crystals that seemed so important to your Federation might allow us to trade with you. We were impressed by the fact that although your greater weaponry would have enabled you to take what you wanted, you did not do so but were willing to negotiate fairly. But," she paused, her face breaking into laugh lines again, "the first contact was a little upsetting to the hive stability, Captain. The young queens were stimulated ahead of their time with unfortunate results. We knew it was done unwittingly, but we wished to see that it did not occur again. You could say you were on trial, Captain.

Kirk felt himself grow hot with embarrassment and cold with panic. He could so easily have blundered irreparably. He had to tell her; it wasn't fair to let her think otherwise.

"I might have failed your test if it hadn't been for Spock," he said honestly, wondering if he was scarlet all the way down to his feet. "Vulcans are...

different from Humans, react differently. Being his bond-brother has its disadvantages."

Her warm laughter filled the room. "Yes, I can begin to see that it might." One massive finger wagged at him a little roguishly. "Now I like you very much, but you may be just the sort of trouble we are trying to avoid."

"Your young queens are...too seductive," Kirk said openly. "Most healthy Human males would naturally be attracted to them."

"They react to the presence of a male." Her eyes twinkled at him. "The more masculine the male the greater the reaction. Katilestea, the girl you first saw, could not have seemed so attractive, since your initial contact was by radio, if I had not ordered a young male to be placed in the room with her. They also find you eminently attractive, I may say, or they would not have given you the drugged wine to drink. Esta was very disappointed by you the previous night!"

"May I make a suggestion, Captain?" Spock said quietly.

"I wonder if you're thinking what I'm thinking..." Kirk waited for his reply.

"That Vulcans are most involved with the mining of this planet," Spock nodded. "Since our natures are very different from those of Humans it would seem to be a practical solution."

"Eminently practical," Kirk agreed. He gave the Basilea an audacious wink. "If you're in any doubt, shut Spock up in a room full of your loveliest young women. They'll be quite safe from him!"

- Really, Jim! -

Kirk showed him an innocent face and looked quickly away again before he broke up. Seeing that the Basilea still looked doubtful he asked, - Would you object to a mind meld, Spock? -

Spock looked at him doubtfully. - It will affect you also, Jim. -

- I don't mind. -

Receiving Spock's consent he made the suggestion and the Basilea's face cleared. "There is no subterfuge in the joining of minds," she said. "Yes, let us share our thoughts."

Kirk watched Spock's lean fingers go gently to the lovely face and let his own mind relax, allowing her to 'see' as much as she wished. The contact was brief but deep and in return she permitted an equally revealing study of her own mind. When contact was broken again Kirk looked at her with even greater respect.

"That was a brave thing to do, to let us learn so much of your duties and responsibilities. You have placed this entire city at the mercy of our goodwill."

The vast shoulders heaved in a shrug. "A calculated risk. Besides..." Her smile grew again. "I like you, James Kirk."

His lips twitched responsively. "I told you we had a great deal in common." He looked up at Spock. "I'm sure the Vulcans will be willing to undertake working with such a fascinating society as this, don't you agree, Mr. Spock?"

"They will be eager to do so," Spock said blandly.

"Then we can draw up agreements mutually beneficial to all," Kirk said. "With your permission, Basilea, we will return tomorrow and make the final arrangements."

She nodded. "I shall look forward to seeing you again. I will call one of the queens to guide you out of here. This chamber is purposely difficult to find."

"Very understandable," Kirk said soberly. "May I take the opportunity to show Spock a little of your beautiful city before we leave here?"

"I will instruct my people to let you move freely about and see all that you wish to. We are flattered by your interest."

They made their farewells and followed the young queen up the winding maze of passages to ground level and out into the exquisite main hall of the Basilica.

"Glorious, isn't it?" Kirk smiled at the stunned appreciation in Spock's mind.

"It would be a privilege to work among these people," Spock said openly.

"Have you ever encountered a society like this before?"

"Never. It is quite fascinating."

"And that Basilea. What a girl!" Kirk gave a sigh of admiration. "What wouldn't I give to have met her before her mating time."

Spock contented himself with a raised eyebrow.

"Oviparous?" McCoy said curiously. "But the females are...uh...distinctly mammalian. You must have noticed!

"Only a very few of the females are fertile," Kirk explained. "After their mating time those start up new hives, or cities somewhere else, or replace the old queen and start producing the eggs if she is too old. The rest become 'nurses' and spend their lives suckling the young when they are hatched. They aren't a very long-lived species, particularly the males who don't survive the mating time. But as the queens are telepathic they pass on accumulated knowledge to the new queen. Otherwise their society would never have advanced as far as it has. And the queens are tremendously powerful; they control the cities and take care of the immature ones. They control their behaviour patterns to some extent, but can't take real telepathic control of them for very long periods without damaging them. That's why the Basilea kept using a different woman each day to see how I was getting on. But if anything happens to the queen, the whole place goes crazy."

"Doesn't that happen in an ant's nest too?" McCoy said in fascination.

"I've no idea." Kirk laughed. "I suppose it's possible."

"But why did she want you to beam down alone?" McCoy demanded. "Giving us all heart failure..."

"Because she wanted to see if I could keep my hands off the young queens," Kirk grinned. "Apparently the scout ship caused plenty of havoc, but she knew it wasn't intentional - but that's why we've suggested the Vulcans take over the mining rights, rather than Humans. Also," he smirked, "well, I'm the nearest equivalent to a queen bee around here, aren't I?"

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As the Enterprise moved out of orbit a few days later Spock accompanied his bond-brother down in the turbolift.

"I'm sorry I shan't be seeing the Basilea again," Kirk said pensively. "She struck me as being a woman of sense and perception."

Spock gave him a mock-frosty look. "Merely because the unfortunate lady succumbed to your quite indecent display of charm..."

Kirk grinned at him shamelessly. "We're ordered to Starbase 7 for R & R," he said softly. "It's a superb place for a camping holiday. Care to join me?"

Spock's eyes softened at the combination of tentative shyness and genuine desire for his company that he read through their bond.

"I should be pleased to do so, Jim."

Kirk found himself looking forward to his brief spell of shore leave with more anticipation than he had felt for years, and almost literally kept his fingers crossed in case anything should happen to defer it. It wouldn't be the first itime an eagerly awaited R & R had been cancelled at a moment's notice. However this time random factors seemed to be operating in their favour, and they beamed down to the base, each hearing the other's mental sigh of relief.

"Just a courtesy call to pay on the Commodore before we leave," Kirk said happily. "Don Parrish is an old friend. I'll meet you in the Central Hall by the main stairway. Go and buy yourself the gear you need and I'll join you in about fifteen minutes."

He was greeted with great pleasure by his friend and they spent several minutes catching up on news. Then Parrish gave Kirk a massive wink. "I've got a young lady on my staff who's been hopping up and down with excitement ever since she learned the Enterprise was due here."

"Oh yes? Who's that?"

Parrish pressed his intercom. "You can come in now, Lt. Commander."

The office door swished open and Kirk found himself looking at a face from the past. "Helen! Helen Johanssen!"

"How very tactful of you to remember me, Jim," she dimpled.

"Remember you? How could I forget?" He gave her a delighted hug.

Parrish surveyed them indulgently. "I'm sure you have a lot to discuss... but not in my office!"

"I can take a hint." Kirk shook his hand. Nice to see you again, Don."

Outside the door Helen looked him up and down. "You don't seem to have changed, Admiral."

He shook his head. "Captain. That's quite good enough for me. I'm not the desk job sort."

She laid a hand on his arm. "I understand you're here for a few days leave."

"That's right."

"I've...uh...got a few days leave myself," she said demurely. Kirk bit his lip and eyed her pensively.

Spock took another look around the busy area. The new uniforms might be practical, but it was more difficult to pick out the face you wanted in a crowd when you did not have the distinguishing shirts to assist you in eliminating a lot of the passers by. He was reluctant to intrude on Jim's talk with Commodore Parrish, but he had said about fifteen minutes and it was now precisely forty-five. He swung his head again, restraining a frown. Was that him? No. He continued his outwardly impassive search.

There. That was him...and he was not alone. The keen Vulcan eyesight took in the mature loveliness of the woman holding Jim's arm.in that possessive grip and the open admiration in the eyes that she raised to Jim's face. He guessed it would be most tactful if he slipped quietly away now before they saw him. He could relay a message from the ship, urgent emergency work orequired in the computer section would be a valid excuse. He picked up the soft carryall at his feet and walked away towards the transporter hall.

- SPOCK! -

The mental shout brought him to a standstill.

- Where the hell do you think you're going? -

- Jim, I do understand. Enjoy your shore leave. -

- Come back here at once if you want me to do that, then. Camping alone's no fun. -

- Alone? - Spock tried to cover his pleasure.

- Yes, if you don't come with me. -

Spock turned to see Kirk hurrying towards him, and alone. He waited for him to come up and said tentatively, "Jim, are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure," Kirk said quietly. "Spock, you are the best cure for loneliness I've ever met. Come on. Let's head for the hills."

Spock fell into step beside him.

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